UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Employing Africa in the Broadway Musical:
Artistic Labors and Contested Meanings of the Racial Body, from 1903 to 2009

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Theater Studies

by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have survived this dissertation process (or this degree program) without my faith in God and the spiritual support of my two church families: Saint Michael's Episcopal in Isla Vista, under the guidance of their fabulous vicar, Reverend Nicole Janelle; and Saint Ann's Episcopal in Nashville, Tennessee, under the guidance of the wonderful Father Rick Britton. I am deeply grateful for their love and resources. The St. Ann's choir, under the masterful direction of Rollie Mains, was an oasis of sound amid the generally isolated and silent work of writing.

I am deeply appreciative of the following individuals who took the time to answer my questions, or to offer advice and thoughtful words: all the professors and staff mentors here at UCSB's Department of Theater and Dance, particularly Simon Williams, Mary Tench and the office staff, Annie Torsiglieri, Suk-Young Kim, Ellen Anderson, Leo Cabranes-Grant, Eric Mills, Michael Morgan, Ninotchka Bennahum, Irwin Appel, Jeff Mills, Susan McMillan, Jamie Birkett and Steve Cooper, Tom Whitaker, Jody Enders, Carlos Morton, Nancy Kawalek (in the Department of Film and Media Studies), Erin Cressida-Wilson, and Risa Brainin; my inspirational and brilliant committee members (Professors W. Davies King, Stephanie L. Batiste, and Christina S. McMahon), who have each personally enhanced my study of musical theater and my writing; all my MA/PhD program colleagues, especially Torsten Sannar, Dan Hodnett, Meredith Heller, and Gerry Hansen; and of course the students in the BFA Acting program.

I am grateful for the professional guidance and warm reception I found in the librarians at UCSB's Davidson library and at the Nashville and New York City Public Libraries, particularly the staff overseeing NYPL's Billy Rose and Schomberg Collections. I am honored by the generosity of time given to me by: Jim Ferris for his *Lion King* interview; Jim Lewis, Daniel Soto, and Seycon Sengbloh for their *FELA!* interviews; and UCSB's Arts & Lectures staff for supporting my audience research. I am indebted as well to all the scholars who participated with me in the numerous conferences that helped shape many sections of this work.

For providing uncountable hours of entertainment and stress-release during my dissertation process I have to thank: my housemates in the Santa Barbara Student Housing Co-Op, especially my roommates Grace, Taylor, Edgar, Sarah, Ethan, Maxine, Lizzie, Zulema, and Vicente; my one-time but cherished roommate Kane Anderson; my friend Tiffany DeVries and all the staff, students, and alumni of the Music Academy of the West; my enormous network of friends around the country, especially Kim Faust, Kate Martin, Liam Clancy and Ursula Rothfuss, Marc Lacuesta and Dana Grace Neal. For continuing words of encouragement I thank my friend Kai Bernal and my entire family, especially the female elders who repeatedly told me to “stay in school.” I thank my beloved godson Patrick Vilath Mann for beginning this journey in Santa Barbara with me. Finally, I offer particular thanks to my adviser Dr. McMahon, whose passion for African diaspora performance was the primary influence in my choice to write about Africa-focused Broadway musicals.

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ABSTRACT

Employing Africa in the Broadway Musical:

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My dissertation looks at representations of Africa throughout Broadway's history in order to explore how these stagings have both supported and challenged racial discrimination, and how they help us reconsider the shared cultural heritage of American musical theater. I investigate how black laboring bodies claimed agency and forged new communities on Broadway stages over ten decades, despite other scholars' notions of Broadway as inherently “white space.” My method combines ethnography, spatial-visual and semiotic analysis to explore how the theatrical black body has re-shaped American social and political imagination through musical stage performances. These performances, in turn, re-circulate in global networks in ways that both challenge and re-affirm the domination of American cultural influences and the “Otherness” of black Africanity within the genre of the musical. Ultimately, I demonstrate that there is a long and continuing tradition within the commercial American theater of utilizing a staged vision of Africa for various ends. As significant as it is to acknowledge the challenging, bold gestures made by a number of Broadway's theater artists, it is also important to show, finally, that the entire trajectory of musical theater has developed in conversation with an African Other and an

imagined African space (be it a threatening pagan jungle or prehistoric paradise). No matter how progressive, most musical theater histories to date still affirm black musical theater and artists as an additive, rather than reexamining musical theater history as a conversation about race from its inception. My dissertation intervenes in critical race theory, citizenship studies, musical theater studies and performance studies by showing how Africa-focused musicals function as under-acknowledged and progressive social change vehicles in the United States.

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Introduction

In Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina!,* the opening monologue is spoken by a charismatic student who is nicknamed "Colgate" by his peers because he is always smiling and showing off his white teeth. Colgate's charisma is a warm welcome amid the harsh, forbidding environment the audience is visually introduced to at the musical's beginning. The members of an on-stage band are dressed as South African soldiers circa 1976 and are seated around an armored tank vehicle far upstage. This band area is separated from the open playing space by barbed-wire fencing and scaffolding, creating an atmosphere of criminality and social crisis. This staging of a story of apartheid in a Broadway musical theater house is made even more provocative by Colgate's humorous monologue. Sharply dressed in a white shirt, black tie, black sweater, grey pants and dark socks and shoes, Colgate and his similarly well-groomed classmates appear disciplined and attractive—visually dissonant with the criminal or war-like set that surrounds them.

Like many Africa-focused musicals, *Sarafina!* aims to teach its audience about the power of black performance as an agentive force. In *Sarafina!,* the lesson is about how painful living conditions are transformable through performance into the covenant of beauty and harmonious reconciliation that the dream of a free South Africa embodies. This dream is announced during Colgate's opening monologue when he tells the audience, "Teargas has become our perfume."[1]

Colgate's performed statement encapsulates not only the transformative power of performance (performance as the process through which something can "become"), but also the long history of slavery and the violent oppression of black people ("teargas"), as well as

[1] Mbogeni Ngema, *Mbogeni Ngema's Sarafina!: The Times, The Play, The Man* (Cape Town: Nasou / Via Afrika, 2005), 59.

a people's ability to craft an art that affirms beauty and value ("perfume") out of this violent legacy. Colgate's invocation of "our," recited by a black South African to Broadway's predominantly white audience, highlights issues of cultural and national ownership as well as the definitions of "audience" and "community." *Tear gas has become our perfume.* Which selves are listening in or being spoken to, and are they hearing the same thing? In this dissertation I ask: What symbolic, aesthetic, and economic work do musicals about Africa actually do, and for whom? How do these shows challenge or reinforce our social conceptions of race and oppression? My theoretical inspiration for these lines of inquiry comes from the shows themselves. Africa-focused Broadway musicals are mostly under-appreciated and often significantly misunderstood, but many engage in and embody through their performers important theories and visions about race, art, and national belonging.

I argue that many of the artists who created Africa-focused musicals, and who had their shows produced in Broadway theater spaces, created these entertainments with the belief that their works would do more than just entertain. In each of their eras, a distinct discourse on black racial difference and its attendant conceptualization of Africa has prevailed. The artists I discuss here responded to these discourses by staging their own visions of "Africa." The arguments each of these artists have with their historical moment is articulated in song and dance, and in every case the black performing body tests these arguments in the living theory that is Africanist performance practice. This living theory of song and dance, made visible to audiences willing to read it, is at the heart of the visionary success of most African diaspora-related musicals, particularly the Africa-focused Broadway musicals under discussion here.

The creators of these shows relied on the performing black body to make their musical theater visions of Africa legible. Yet the presence of the black performing body in musical

theater stage space continues to be haunted by the essentialized racial meanings imposed on it since the nineteenth century. As a result, the profundity of the political imagination in the works often escapes careful reading. In other words, it is inescapable that Africa-focused Broadway musicals both re-affirm as well as challenge the American social and political imagination around race—although it is the antiracist work of these shows that I affirm here and that in many cases is misunderstood. This dissertation, then, examines how a lucrative idea of Africa, created out of imperialism, has been used in antiracist representations on the Broadway musical stage for over a century by theater artists working to re-imagine this idea and its location in American identity.

I analyze six musicals that have relied on the physically creative labor of black theater artists, and whose narratives or themes also purport to be about Africa: *In Dahomey* (1903), *Kykunkor* (1934), *Lost In The Stars* (1949), *Sarafina!* (1988), *The Lion King* (1997), and *Fela!* (2009). Through a close semiotic reading based on these shows' plots, music, recorded performances, marketing, public reception, and labor practices, and through short-term ethnographic work, I interrogate the way Africa is literally and figuratively "employed" in these shows as an adaptable but resilient signifier of racial, sexual, gendered, religious, aesthetic, and socio-economic identity. I reveal these shows as historically-specific examples of what E. Patrick Johnson calls "black performance-as-epistemology."[2] Johnson sees 'blackness' as having no essence. Instead it is a concept understood and made visible to others through performance. Performance is social and therefore political, so for Johnson 'blackness' is a term that comes to mean a political maneuvering and a way of characterizing the lived experience of people who are identified, by themselves or others in society, as 'black.' Black performance, then, is a window into the cultural life of black people as well as

[2] E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 449.

a mode of political engagement, and the six Africa-focused musicals I study here encompass both uses of Johnson's formulation.

Thinking back to my previous example from *Sarafina!*, I remind the reader that both tear gas and perfume are frequently encountered as a gas which, like racism and integration, "has neither independent shape nor volume but tends to expand indefinitely."[3] In other words, racism and integration are somewhat intangible, like tear gas and perfume, yet they are perceivable and palpable as social forces. Both tear gas and perfume, like racism and integration, are effective beyond initial contact with the body and enact a haunting on all who encounter them. All of these creations invoke questions of morality in our deployment of them. Tear gas is widely understood as a weapon, but perfume, used subversively, can also be a weapon. *Tear gas has become our perfume.* What sounds at first like only a poetic phrase reveals itself as a deeper meditation on black cultural-political response to human suffering. What does this suffering, this response, or Africa itself have to do with Broadway musical theater? These deeper meditations and political re-imaginings constitute a visionary achievement, and it is the profound success of this aspect of antiracist Africa-focused Broadway musicals that is most often misunderstood and under-appreciated. Often these shows articulate, through the language of song and dance, acute understandings of race and national identity that are well in advance of the textual, official, and academic explorations of these same ideas.

What is at Stake: The Historical Idea of 'Africa' in Popular Culture

Up until and throughout much of the twentieth century the longstanding idea of Africa, as depicted in American popular culture, was of an inferior place and peoples. This Africa

[3] 'Gas,' *Merriam-Webster.com,* Merriam-Webster, 2012, Web, s.v., http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gas (accessed November 8, 2012).

was a "dark continent," an unknowable place of danger and forbidden depths, and was personified by its dark-skinned, lawless, and godless people. When not depicted as a savage place, Africa was imagined as an "Eden-in-waiting," a lush paradise populated by dark-skinned people who were too simple and child-like to know what to do with its resources. Some awareness of the physical, cultural, and intellectual resources of Africa has been evident throughout the world since antiquity.[4] The more historically recent view of Africa as primitive and savage, but incredibly *useful* to the west, was developed during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, as many European nations invested in empire-building projects that positioned them as superior vis-à-vis the other (and often darker) peoples of the world.

Pieterse (1995), for example, discusses how in sixteenth century maps and depictions of the world, the continents are personified as a group of women, with Europe always posed in the center as a queen, and with Africa typically shown as a loose-haired, nearly nude but *bejeweled* female subject, positioned with a tamed lion at Europe's feet and holding a scorpion in her hand.[5] These images over time, employed in maps and in the travel writings of explorers, educated their viewers to think of Africa as a place of submission and inferiority, primitivity, wanton sexuality, affinity with wild animals, and always as a site of abundant natural wealth—all stereotypes of Africa that survive in different ways in nineteenth and twentieth-century representations of both Africa and its diaspora. The nearly-nude pose of a black body near an animal, for example, returns as an element of the classic picaninny image from Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* (1899) books.[6] American

[4] Stefan Goodwin, *Africa in Europe: Antiquity Into the Age of Global Expansion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 1:34.

[5] J.N. Pieterse, *White on black: Images of Africa and blacks in western popular culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 19.

[6] Helen Bannerman, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (Chicago: Reilly & Lee, 1908). In Bannerman's story, a little black male child named Sambo is attacked by animals and loses his clothes in the process. Sambo ultimately outsmarts the animals. Yet his nude, or near-

images of inferior, primitive blackness were inherited from the nation's world-building, European colleagues. However, the transatlantic slave trade and America's gradual establishment as an imperial power further developed what was initially a taste into a cultural hunger for images, scientific philosophies, and literature that explained and celebrated American national strength and its global position in racialized terms.[7]

Travel writers and novelists, in addition to the creators of emergent popular entertainment forms, provided many of the most convincing explanations for and examples of savage, primitive, inferior blackness in their books. These imaginative but racist cultural artifacts, in turn, served as ideological justifications for the continued oppression of the African diaspora and the exploitation of resources held by them. For example, former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt's conquest and collection tour of Africa from 1909 to 1910 was key to reinforcing our ideas about Africa as wild space, thanks to his colorfully worded safari narratives that were run in American newspapers.[8] Roosevelt's travel dispatches helped romanticize the safari in literature and in the popular imagination, and justified for readers all of the safari's exploitative activities.

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nude and unkempt body, often depicted in a scene with a wild animal such as a tiger or alligator, is the lingering image from that series of children's books. Popular into the mid-twentieth century, the books were still trading in sixteenth century ideas about the black body and the kind of entertaining spectacle it should provide.

[7] Stefan Goodwin, *Africa in Europe: Interdependencies, Relocations, and Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 2:83. The formation of a racialized, "white" modernity in opposition to a non-white ethnic primitivity is discussed in Goodwin but is also explored in two other important works. Marianna Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive* (1991) looks at the foundational concept of the primitive and its imperial uses across fields of culture. Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) looks at the way Euro-American writers have constructed the field of American literature as "white" by ignoring real knowledge about blacks, while simultaneously inventing notions of Africa for their own purposes.

[8] Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 113-114.

Examples of literature that helped justify ideologies of black oppression abound, particularly in fiction, where books like Sir H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) series present Africa as a space of ultimate danger and (white) man-shaping adventure.[9] Burroughs' Tarzan character, appearing in pulp novels published on a nearly annual basis from the 1910s into the 1940s, even appeared in his own Africa-focused Broadway show, Disney's *Tarzan: The Musical* (2006).[10] The most influential of the early modern novels on the subject of Africa is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which Africa is the literal location of Hell on earth for the book's protagonist.[11] Conrad is recognized as one of the founders of literary modernism,[12] so his ideological "footprint" on the popular image of Africa in Western culture is tremendously influential. The fictions of Conrad, Burroughs, and others were indelibly linked to imperial gazing and fantasies of unknown encounters. They circulated widely and helped define the dominant twentieth-century perception of Africa and its diaspora. Furthermore, their fictions survived to shape early cinema (Figure 1). For example, the silent film version of *Tarzan of the Apes* (1918) and the more popular Hollywood adaptation fourteen years later, *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932), are unambiguous in the debt they owe to the early literature about Africa. The popular work of travel writers and novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries collectively form Africa's

[9] H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002), 12.

[10] "100 Best Characters in Fiction Since 1900," *http://www.npr.org (*accessed July 20, 2013). National Public Radio has ranked Tarzan at #74 out of the best 100 fictional characters. While *Tarzan: The Musical* is not a case study in this dissertation, I plan on examining the show and its reception as a future study.

[11] Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa*, 193.

[12] John Henry Stape, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 223.

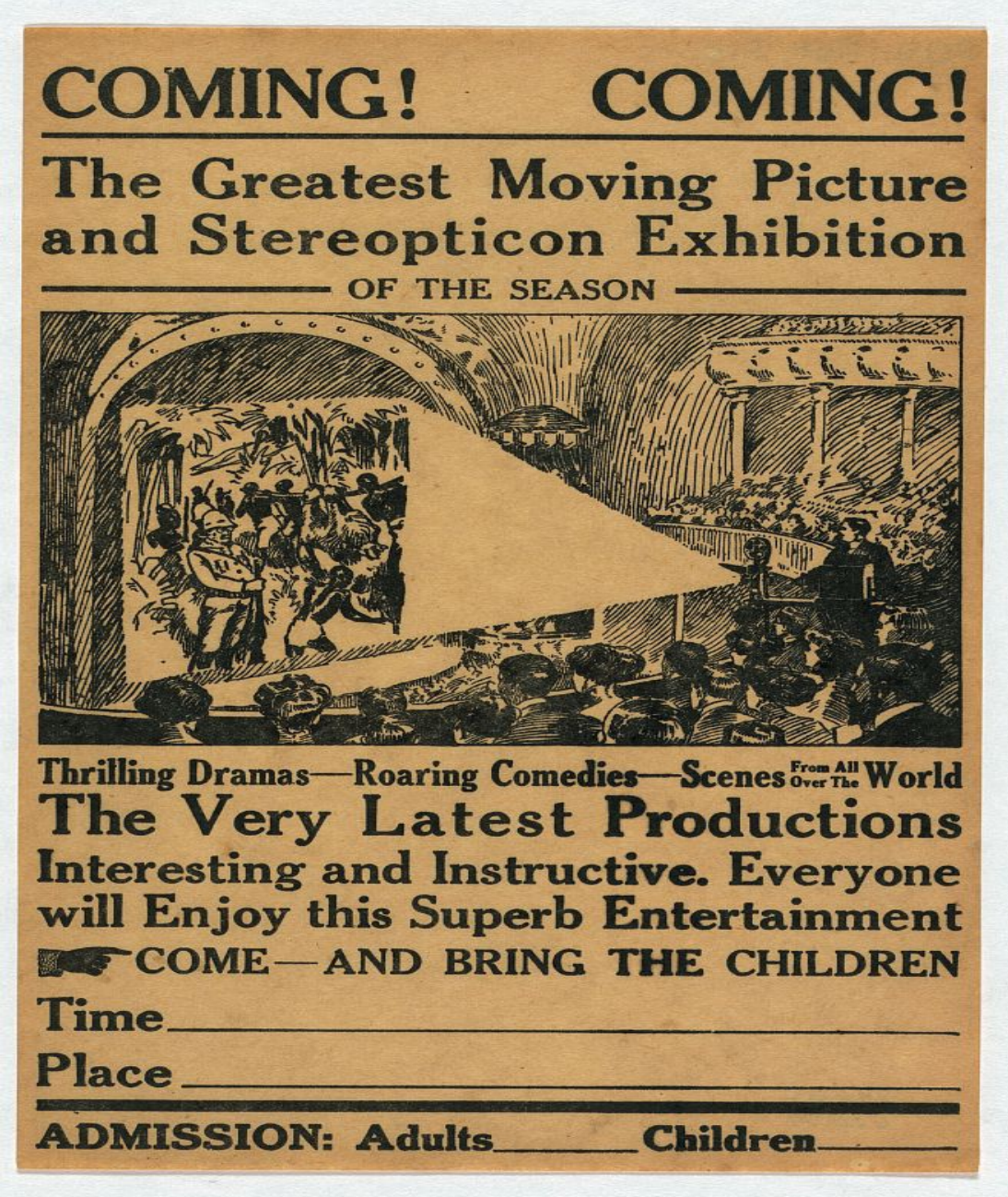

Figure 1. This poster from the early days of American cinema, circa 1900, speaks to the ubiquity of the "darkest Africa" idea in popular entertainments. Here, a white audience enjoys the privilege of observing "scenes from all over the world." In the illustration the audience is consuming an explicitly colonial African scene, wherein the half-naked, black bodies on screen are naturalized as an inferior class. The presence of the fully-dressed and helmeted, white, overseer figure makes this naturalization possible. The fact that this African scene of forced labor and resource acquisition is "instructive" and good for children, further highlights the racialized morality of modernity as well as the popular use of a racist idea of Africa. Source: Library of Congress, Public Domain Image Archive.

literary legacy in Europe and America. Meanwhile, like a virus, this idea of Africa would find continued popularity and infectious grammars of racial representation outside of the pages of literature, taking hold in the new transatlantic performance forms emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Of all the emerging, transatlantic performance forms in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two forms shared a dependence on the literary, racist idea of Africa: anthropological—artistic displays or, "ethnological shows" —and the blackface minstrelsy tradition.[13] Of these two, the blackface minstrel tradition warrants special mention because it was a form that prioritized song, dance, and dramatic recitation as a means to bolster its authenticity claims and increase its marketability and commercial appeal. Its legacy in popular culture in general is complex, and the shadow this tradition casts on Africa-focused Broadway musicals is arguably longer and heavier than even the early racist literature on Africa.

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[13] Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Africans On Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), vii. The *anthropological-artistic display* is an ideological presentation of a living ethnic body or non-living ethnic object. In the case of Africa this could include such things as: the corpse of an animal or amputated human body part, taken from the African continent and used in the course of a medical lecture; a work of African art; a curated collection of ethnic artifacts; a re-created African village—complete with villagers performing tasks meant to be seen as authentic; or, the touring of a living African person on display for curious European and American audiences. The anthropological-artistic display as it was known throughout most of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was carefully arranged and inevitably featured the African person or object in a narrative of progress meant to establish the modernity of imperial cultural practice, knowledge, and aesthetics.

Lindfors' edited collection on these practices, *Africans On Stage*, takes a particular interest in the display and touring of the living African body, and defines his term for this practice, "ethnological show business," as "the displaying of foreign peoples for commercial and/or educational purposes." Lindfors argues that these practices became increasingly common in the industrial world after technological advances and imperialist campaigns put transatlantic human communities in closer contact with each other, a phenomenon that Z.S. Strothers' chapter on Sara Baartman in this anthology narrates. *Africans On Stage* helps us understand that ethnological shows were not just entertainments but powerful ideological performances.

The *blackface minstrel show* was a popular, nineteenth-century stage entertainment in which a group of four to a dozen white men, typically from the northern states of the U.S., sat in a semi-circle on stage with musical instruments and performed a mix of songs, jokes, dances, and dramatic skits while caricaturing people from the African diaspora. These white minstrels wore burnt cork makeup to give them the black appearance by which the form gets its name, and through mimicry based on observation or through outright imaginative invention, these men performed a derogatory idea of blackness by satirically referencing the dances, "vocal choreography,"[14] and vernacular social traditions of people from the African diaspora who were enslaved in the American South. For example, Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, credited with originating blackface minstrelsy, allegedly created his famous "Jim Crow" persona after watching an old, disabled black laborer sing and dance as he worked. His "Jim Crow" character became the popular template for virtually all blackface minstrel performers who followed.[15] A full treatment of the historical development of minstrelsy and the nature of its aesthetic and shifting form is outside the scope of this dissertation, but two elements of minstrelsy's legacy for the Africa-focused Broadway musical are essential to note here.

First, minstrelsy emphasized what dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz sees as the contradictory *strangeness* of the performing black body—a body that is both greater than average in its power yet inferior in its embodiment of emotion and "authentic," primitive, or childlike instinct.[16] This survives into musical theater culture and is noticeable in reviews of

[14] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 118.

[15] Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1930), 20.

[16] Thomas DeFrantz, "Simmering Passivity: The Black Male Body in Concert Dance," in *Moving words: Re-writing dance*, ed. Gay Morris (New York: Routledge, 1996), 96.

Africa-focused Broadway musicals. Stirling Bowen's *Wall Street Journal* review for *Kykunkor* (1934), for example, describes dancer Abdul Assen's performance of the Witch Doctor in that musical as reaching "a high pitch of *hysteria* in its representation. Although the scene is *strenuous* it does not arrive at the realm of the terrible, however, because of the *child-like* nature of the make-believe" (emphases mine).[17] The strangeness that DeFrantz theorizes is registered here in Bowen's comments, which are typical of the mainstream journalist responses to Africa-focused Broadway musicals throughout the twentieth century.

The second element in blackface minstrelsy's legacy is the revelation of performance as a racial mask. By exaggerating and distorting the physical and cultural qualities presented by the African diaspora, the white male inventors of blackface minstrelsy made visible the notion of race as a performed idea. It is through the workings of this racial mask that scholars have theorized the possibilities of black performers using blackface as resistance against the racism of the dominant culture. Louis Chude-Sokei (2005), for example, alternately calls the black-on-black minstrelsy work of Bert Williams "activist primitivism" and "nationalist minstrelsy," defining this as the deployment of primitivist representation against racist intent. While not an example of blackface, the conscious deployment of primitivist ideas about blackness is visible in the "booty clock" from the musical *Fela!* (2009). In the dance, choreographer-director Bill T. Jones instructs his Broadway audience to dance using only the hips and buttocks. In doing so, Jones points to stereotypes of visible blackness while simultaneously pointing to the fact that the audience members, in "moving black," have themselves troubled the fixity of those stereotypes.

[17] Stirling Bowen, "The Theatre," *Wall Street Journal* (1923 - Current File), Jun 16, 1934, http://search.proquest.com/docview/131186473?accountid=14522 (accessed May 26, 2014).

Contested Meanings

This dissertation emerges out of a primary assumption: that musical theater is a highly ideological, highly conceptual art form, which is shaped from and expresses nationalist desires and participates in national discourses. As a mode of nationalist expression, the musical is therefore useful to the ongoing historical and philosophical consideration of nationhood and social identity. A few theorists should be noted whose work helps me understand musical theater as an ideological practice.

One of the first critical studies on the musical was the edited anthology *Genre, The Musical: A Reader* (1981). In his introduction to this anthology, Rick Altman speaks to the under-appreciated complexity of the film musical, calling the form a "rhetorical masterwork."[18] Also contributing to *Genre, The Musical* was Jane Feuer.[19] Feuer attempted to articulate the way film musicals created pleasure for their audiences, and ultimately argued that the form, being reflexive, accounted for this pleasure principle. Richard Dyer's essay, "Entertainment and Utopia," which was later expanded for his book *Only Entertainment* (1992), articulated the logic of musical form and feeling, and offered a taxonomy of the pleasures of the film musical that Feuer had identified in her work. While Altman, Feuer, and Dyer were specifically concerned with the film musical, their collective

[18] Rick Altman, "Introduction," in *Genre, the musical: A reader*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1981), 5-6. Altman further explored these initial ideas on film musicals in his full-length work *The American Film Musical* (1989), arguing that film scholars did not fully appreciate film musicals—and therefore did not write about them in a critically thorough manner—because they analyzed musicals with an emphasis on narrative plot and not on its inherently conceptual structure of meaning.

[19] Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Genre, the musical: A reader,* ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1981), 161. Feuer's 1977 essay "The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment" was reprinted in *Genre* and later expanded for her book *The Hollywood Musical* (1977). Feuer argued that entertainments like the film musical had greater value than they initially appeared to have and were essentially "ideological products."

understanding of musical storytelling as significant ideological work has been useful for scholars looking at the form and social function of stage musicals, and has helped shape the developing field of musical theater studies.

Michael Eigtved (2002) and Stacey Wolf (2002) helped establish critical discussion within theater scholarship of *stage* musicals and their social function. In his essay "The Musical (Theater) as Equipment for Urban Living,"[20] Eigtved understands popular musical theater not necessarily as national but as specifically expressive of the challenges of urban living. The genre's development in America occurred at the moment of this nation's growth in the early years of the twentieth century. For Eigtved, this inherently ties the traditional form of the musical to the United States as a geographically and culturally specific product. However, his insistence on reading the popular musical as an urban mirror allows his theory to include newer changes in traditional musical form and to be applied to other urban centers like London, without being limited by a focus on national or governmental boundaries.

Stacy Wolf's *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (2002) looks at the mid-century American musical as a place of female agency, while her later book *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (2011) continues her observations and expands them by looking at musicals from the end of the 1940s up through the first decade of the twenty-first century. In both works Wolf identifies the way Broadway musicals and audiences interact reflexively to shape social meaning around gender and sexuality, and how women have played a central role in that shaping through their work in musical theater. Wolf's inclusion of source material not conventionally included in scholarly studies of musicals—for example, audience interviews and memories

[20] Michael Eigtved, "The Musical (Theater) as Equipment for Urban Living," in *The Urban Lifeworld: Formation, Perception, Representation,* eds. Peter Madsen and Richard Plunz (London: Routledge, 2002).

of a show—is also useful to me in discussing works that often do not have a strong archival presence.

Andrea Most's *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004) argues that American Jews at the mid-century negotiated their belonging as national citizens through the musical theater industry and art form. Focusing on the lives of the most famous creators and practitioners of the field from the mid-1920s through the 1950s, the majority of whom were Jewish, Most makes her biggest contribution to theory by showing the interconnectedness of two previously separated narratives: Jewish acculturation and assimilation in America, and the formation of the mid-century book musical. By focusing on ethnicity and race, Most offers a useful model for discussing black racial difference in the musical, and by focusing on national belonging, Most offers a model for discussing the way Africa-focused Broadway musicals sit at the intersection of racial politics, citizenship, economics, and aesthetics in American theater.

The connection Most makes between race and national identity is also made by Raymond Knapp, whose book, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2006), shows how the continued articulation of themes concerning national identity account for the primacy or continued potency of musical theater as a popular art. Wolf, Most, and Knapp all make the argument that musicals should be studied in their social-historic contexts. The complexity of those contexts, the complexity of musical theater form itself, and the deeply felt and often contradictory responses audiences have to Broadway musicals leads me to the phrase "contested meanings" in this dissertation's title, which refers to the impact of Africa-focused images on the public imagination and the larger national discourses on racial difference that this dissertation pushes critically against.

The Organization of the Work

This dissertation has two organizing structures. The first is a linear structure as I move chronologically through my consideration of the six shows. This chronological move is typical of conventional histories, but also emphasizes the primacy of certain national discourses on black racial difference at certain times during the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first century. One racial discourse supplanted or gained dominance over another as public opinion, legal status, and social contact between the so-called races shifted over time. Discussing the shows in the order they debuted on Broadway highlights these shifts in national discourse.

Moving chronologically also symbolically suggests progression or advancement. However, rather than suggest there has been an unequivocal improvement in national racial politics, I aim to excavate the critical value of many of these forgotten shows and return them to active discussion in musical theater scholarship. I start from the earliest musical in 1903, and move through to the most recent case study in 2009. The parenthetical date (year) that appears next to each musical's title refers to the year of each show's Broadway debut, and not to the years of its initial public appearance or artistic completion. Completion dates sometimes coincide with a show's Broadway premiere, but often do not. Prioritizing the year of each show's Broadway debut marks the moment of its widest introduction into popular culture.

The second structure is circular, by which I have further grouped the musicals into thematic chapters. These four larger themes, which I consider to be the main organizing discourses of black identity within Broadway musical theater, are “Racial Authenticity,” “Racialized Citizenship”, “Cultural Commodification,” and “Transracial Community.” I have identified these four discourses as primary through my encounters with the various

bodies of theory shaping my considerations of the six case studies. Like a circle, a different thematic key phrase will run through each chapter but is also likely to return, informing and building on my readings of other shows in other chapters. I do not claim that the four discourses I focus on are the only North American social-political discourses, the only discourses of African diaspora identity, or that they are the only discourses that shape musical theater history. I do, however, see these discourses as the primary considerations for musical theater historiography's treatment of black racial difference. Furthermore, I argue that these four themes are essential for a proper understanding of the way Broadway musicals set in Africa are understood by their audiences and critically received over time, though I do not claim to offer the exhaustive reading of Africa-focused musicals. My study is but one effort to bring critical attention to under-appreciated artists and works.

Broadway as Place

There is a kind of umbrella discourse uniting many of my assessments of Africa-focused Broadway musicals, and that is the discourse of *place.* Within that discourse are concerns and questions about the ideological powers attached to the geographic and historic New York City location we call "Broadway." The invocation of the name "Broadway" and its attachment to objects, events, and résumés carries cultural power.[21] This symbolic and emotional power is supported by the material reality of conspicuous cultural consumption in this bounded space.[22] The term "Broadway" as a geographic referent is used to identify the streets, large theater houses, and associated theater industry buildings that comprise the Theater District in New York City. This commercial district located around Times Square is,

[21] William R. Taylor, ed., *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), xi.

[22] John Hull Mollenkopf, ed., *Power, Culture and Place: Essays on New York City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), xvii.

"a hub centered at Broadway and Forty-Second Street with axes radiating in all directions."[23] As a cultural referent, the term "Broadway" is used to mark the actual productions that occur in officially recognized Broadway houses as well as many of the performance-related market products made within the Theater District's geographic boundaries. Because the location and industry that is Broadway arguably assembles more continuously produced and more widely-attended theater activity than any other region in the United States,[24] and because professional theater practitioners award the highest honors of the art form to plays produced in Broadway theaters, the label *Broadway* carries with it the connotation of performer excellence and an expectation of financial success. My desire to focus my dissertation on Broadway shows rather than other musicals that have found success primarily through touring or non-Broadway avenues is one result of Broadway's material, commercial, and conceptual dominance in the field of musical theater performance.

Broadway shows are also highly documented performances in comparison to non-Broadway shows and their archival presence is significantly larger in volume and materially more secure. The sheer number of advertisements and newspaper reviews created for, or in response to, a Broadway show means a potentially wider range of material evidence. Broadway musicals are plugged into a larger economy of circulation and signification that extends the reading and effect of any one show's initial moment of performance; most non-Broadway shows do not circulate with this same degree of cultural privilege and visibility.

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[23] Taylor, *Inventing Times Square*, xvi.

[24] Las Vegas may be the exceptional challenger in the United States to the dominance of Broadway's theater activity. I do not know of any study comparing the current or historical density and frequency of theatrical production occurring in Las Vegas with that of New York. Susan Bennett's work (2005) on theater and tourism is not a direct comparison study, but does position these two cities as case studies in her larger examination of the dominance of touristic practices, arguing for greater scholarly attention to the role and production of commercial theater within theater histories.

Broadway is an enduring standard against which many performances and careers are measured and evaluated, and remains an ideological symbol regularly invoked as a way to affirm America's achievement in theater. "Broadway" thus signifies theater in which the primary concern is commercial success and popularity, in contrast to other kinds of theater staged in New York City or elsewhere in the nation where the priorities are different, such as theater primarily concerned with aesthetic or ideological concerns.[25]

The conjunction of physical location, material resource, symbolic meaning, and social interaction aligns critical discussion of Broadway-as-place to the recent "spatial turn" in a number of academic fields, but especially to the concerns of space and place within the field of human geography. I follow Tuan here in understanding *space* as neutral but something that becomes *place* through human interaction.[26] Human presence gives a previously undefined space a sense of security,[27] a personality,[28] and establishes the identity of a space as a center of value.[29]

The connection to human geography, through an invocation of America-as-place, makes the material and aesthetic interactions of Broadway musicals important to study. An awareness of America as a place also underscores the critical nature of Broadway musicals and their messages concerning the place that is Africa. Africa-focused musicals locate one

[25] When a show emphasizing other priorities appears on Broadway, assessments of the ultimate value of the show based solely on commercial success can be flawed or can obscure aspects of the show that might be more apparent in a different setting or before a different audience.

[26] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 54.

[27] Ibid., 3.

[28] Ibid., 17.

[29] Ibid., 18.

historically contingent space and politicized idea of place (the racist idea of Africa and responses to it) within another already historically contingent space and politicized place (Broadway). In this way the performance of place in Africa-focused musicals makes the already ideological space of Broadway musical theater a *contested* ideological space. At the same time, because modernity, U.S. nationalism, and musical theater culture are all constituted from the start with the dominant assumption that "Africa" is outside of what is normal within their boundaried definitions, Africa continues to be *displaced* on Broadway.

Racial Authenticity, Performance Studies, and Critical Race Theory

The performance of identity in Africa-focused Broadway musicals allows its performers and audience members to critically interrogate the notion of racial authenticity. I turn to performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson for my use of the term "authenticity." Conceptualizing of black performance as an epistemology, Johnson states that "performance facilitates self- and cultural reflexivity—a knowing made manifest by a 'doing'."[30] This cultural- and self-knowing emerges through forms of performance. Johnson argues that this black knowing has been subject to erasure and marginalization, demonstrating this by elucidating some of these performative forms of black knowing—such as the sermon—that have been traditionally disregarded in intellectual inquiry. For Johnson, black knowing, like black life, simply 'is,' though he also acknowledges the need to resist the narrowing and essentializing of blackness as a term of identity. Through the performance of black knowing, anti-racist black performance works against the wider falsehoods of Broadway musical history's representation of black cultures. It is this representational tension that gives many Africa-focused musicals their ideologically troublesome appeal. These shows are especially appealing when we remember that during the formative years of the musical theater genre,

[30] Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 446.

hegemonic popular culture used the words “Africa” and “black” as synonyms; the meaning of one word folded seamlessly into the meaning of the other. Black artists in Africa-focused musicals worked in and through these gaps in meaning in order to generate new diasporic senses of self, and to provide positive, public representations of black cultural passion, agency, and uplift. Thus, they do constructive and critical work on race. In this way my dissertation contributes to the field of critical race studies by approaching its concerns through a performance studies angle.

A key premise underlying the work of critical race theorists like Richard Delgado (1999) and Mari Matsuda (1997) is the belief that "a culture constructs social reality in ways that promote its own self-interest."[31] This social reality is constructed through "words, stories, and silence"—in other words, through storytelling.[32] As Aguirre, Jr. (2007) points out, these stories can be stories constructed by the minority, by the majority (“stock”), by the individual, or they can be collective.[33] Critical race theory sees law as one of a number of modes of story (again, not fixed, but constructed) that shape the world we live in.[34] Changes to this world, such as the dismantling of racial injustice and an end to racist notions of black authenticity, is then theoretically possible through a deconstruction of negative, oppressive stories and the deployment of positive ones—what Mari Matsuda describes as “a use of

[31] Richard Delgado, “Introduction,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge, 2nd Edition,* ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), xvii.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Adalberto Aguirre, Jr., "Academic Storytelling: A Critical Race Theory Story of Affirmative Action," in *Sociological Perspectives* 43(2): 319-339 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2000), 320.

[34] Crenshaw et al., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1996). For example, lawyer and legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw Williams drew on actual law cases to develop her notion of intersectionality.

language to construct a new space in people's brains,"[35] and what Delgado terms "counterstorytelling."[36] This study posits musical theater performance as a form of counterstorytelling. If traditional musical theater positions the black body as outside of its concern and valuation, then it does so only as an example of the racial storytelling that critical race theorists like Delgado are working to dismantle.

An attack on musical theater history's inequalities is also made possible by a performance studies approach to musical theater. Unlike critical race theory, performance studies embraces the various ways of knowing that are found in the body, which can be accessed through performance. Dwight Conquergood (1985), for example, advocated the performance of ethnographic field research in collaboration with community members in order to bring previously excluded stories, like the kind critical race theorists champion, into the wider conversation.[37] Adopting performance studies approaches answers Mari Matsuda's call for critical race scholars to look for a new epistemological source in "the actual experience, history, culture, and intellectual tradition of people of color in America"—a source embodied in performance.[38]

Paul Gilroy demonstrates the utility of a performance studies approach in critical race theory when he relies on black performance to buttress his arguments. In his book *The Black*

[35] Mari Matsuda. *Where Is Your Body?: And Other Essays on Race, Gender, and the Law* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), xii.

[36] Richard Delgado, "Legal Storytelling: Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," *Michigan Law Review* (1989), reprinted in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge,* ed., Richard Delgado (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 65.

[37] Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," in *Literature in Performance: A Journal of Literary and Performing Art* 5, no.2 (1985): 1-13.

[38] Mari Matsuda, "Looking to the Bottom" Critical Legal Studies and Reparations," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1996).

Atlantic (1993), Gilroy talks of the inherent hybridity and transnational nature of Black performance (such as hip-hop, gospel, and blues) as a way of addressing essentialist and anti-essentialist debates that he feels have dead-ended progress in theorizing race in the new millennium.[39] Black music, for example, is valued by Africentrists as a symbol of "invariant tradition," the idea being that black popular music forms are retentions of African expressive practices. Gilroy argues instead that black music should instead be valued as a powerful symbol of diaspora in its ability to express ethnic sameness *and* difference—what Gilroy calls a "changing same."[40] If black music, with all its commercial popularity, offers such theoretical potential, it is no less true of black Broadway musicals, especially those that are Africa-focused. The case studies I have chosen often resist the cultural essentialism that is so bothersome to race theorists like Gilroy, while offering a non-racist form of "authentic" connection, through song and through the black dancing body, which is important to performance studies scholars like Brenda Dixon Gottschild, whom I will discuss later in this introduction. Yet my study of Africa-focused musicals extends these theories by affirming that the musicals that engage with race form an affective discourse.

Racialized Citizenship and Musical Theater Studies

By staging performances of identity, Africa-focused Broadway musicals interrogate whiteness, privilege, and the racialized discourse that persistently shapes public discussions of citizenship and musical theater history. My use of the term "citizenship" comes from the field of citizenship studies. Many of this emergent field's scholars also work in social geography and post-colonial studies and share a concern for community formation and

[39] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 101.

[40] Ibid., x-xi.

social justice, and seek to dismantle or recuperate the older theories of nation and social-economic responsibility that have held sway over most of the late twentieth century. Because these assumed ideals are often made visible in Africa-focused Broadway musicals, an engagement with citizenship theory is useful. In some cases, citizenship theory may explain why certain stagings of black life in Africa-focused musicals fail or succeed in terms of critical or public approval, imaginative innovation, or material/box office success.

In 1949 British social scientist Thomas Humphrey Marshall's Cambridge lecture called "Citizenship and Social Class" was instrumental in establishing citizenship theory as a distinct area of philosophical and scientific inquiry. [41] Marshall's conception of citizenship had, at its center, the concept of a "universal" citizen who was entitled to a full range of rights by virtue of being a member of a given society. Marshall's theory affirmed citizenship as a valuable but apolitical or neutral concept. What about the special case of a citizen who was explicitly and politically marked as an outsider, and therefore denied some or most of these membership-based entitlements? Marshall's contribution to political theory did not address culture, race, gender, or sex as factors that affected a nation-state's efforts at creating equality or managing its economy.

The idea of the universal citizen as a non-racial one was, in 1949, solely rhetorical. In actual, everyday practice, the national-public concept of the citizen was based on the quite particular figure of the white, middle-class male, who stood as the unmarked norm by which other citizens were measured. In the discourse of mid-century citizenship he was the insider who belongs or was accepted into the community, and to whom notions of legality and civility were attached. Marshall's belief in a nonracial society of equals within a capitalist economy is a foundational ideal for North Americans, a key element of modern liberal

[41] T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and other essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

democracy. Once Marshall articulated this belief as a formal theory, it became seminal in the field and was widely embraced by postwar society.

Since then, Marshall's theory has been dissected by scholars and deemed a failure on three significant counts: for failing to fully account for the features of rights in the twentieth century; for failing to address the reality of cultural and racial difference; and for not understanding how the varied practices, rights, responsibilities, and oppressions associated with these differences call into question older theories like Marshall's, which did not account for them.[42] The utopian enterprise that is musical theater is thus useful for tracking the way citizenship's various promises are honored, expressed, or betrayed. Shaped by different methods, the Africa-focused musical was being used at the mid-century to express the same cutting-edge social questions that engaged T.H. Marshall and other leading theorists of the day.

Currently, there is no full-length critical study of the black musical (or, to be more specific, of musicals dealing thematically with blacks) that attempts to address the whole history of black citizenship through the lens of the Broadway musical. No full-length study has ever been done on Broadway shows (musical or otherwise) whose content was specifically addressing "Africa." Few of the articles and books on black musicals or black theater enter into a deeper than surface analysis of production and offer little insight into the material value of the shows, or what these shows have done or not done by employing people of the African diaspora behind or on those stages. For example, in Ethan Mordden's

[42] See Roche (1987), Kymlicka and Norman (1994), and Turner (1997) for major criticisms and responses to Marshall's work. Roche critiques Marshall's reduction of societies into political communities and invokes Schutz's notion of the "lifeworld" as a way of addressing the social intersubjectivity that Marshall ignores. Kymlicka and Norman critique Marshall's tendency to view citizenship and its rights as a block, and argue that citizenship rights need to be theorized independently of one another. Turner critiques Marshall's view that the basis of citizenship is homogenous community, and argues that communities are ethnic and cultural as well.

2005 history of the Broadway musical during the 1930s, he marginalizes a discussion of black musicals into one lonely chapter.[43] One of the problems with this practice is that race is then positioned as tangential rather than central to the political reality and the aesthetic strategies of American theater's development. However, if race is a fundamental division in the U.S. as well as a fundamental organizing principle in social relationships,[44] then general theater histories, which purport to say something truth-like about American identity and its cultural expressions but do not fully engage with the complications of race, are histories that speak falsely by speaking partially about their representativeness. For the majority of books pertaining to musical theater that are published, this amounts to an exclusionary discourse, which I locate in what New York Times journalist Mel Gussow has called a "definably white Broadwayese."[45]

Writers of alternative musical theater histories like Allen Woll (1989), Stacy Wolf (2002), and Scott Miller (2006) have sought to answer the genre's narrow historiography and sexist, Eurocentric frame with counter-histories that illuminate the contributions of marginalized artists. Miller connects an often-forgotten Bert Williams act with the more-remembered musical *Chicago* that had been inspired by Williams, and in making this connection he affirms "white" musical theater's link to black musical performers and acknowledges the genre's intercultural nature. Stacy Wolf's provocative and important book on gender and sexuality in the American musical, *A Problem Like Maria* (2002), focuses on

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[43] Ethan Mordden, *Sing For Your Supper: The Broadway Musical in the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 89-104. The chapter is called "Harlem on My Mind: The Black Shows and Porgy and Bess."

[44] Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Fictive Kin, Paper Sons, and Compadrazgo," in *Women of Color in Us Society,* eds. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 166.

[45] Mel Gussow, *Theatre on the Edge: New Visions, New Voices* (New York: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1998), 367.

four mid-century women and their performances in iconic musicals, most of which were written by Rodgers and Hammerstein. In giving musicals a queer reconsideration, Wolf challenges the hegemony of musical theater historiography as it has been practiced, and pushes our understanding and appreciation of Broadway musicals as highly conceptual, deeply affective, and political works of art. Allen Woll argues that the black musical has enriched the musical theater tradition despite mainstream critical bias, ultimately affirming that black musicals occupy a kind of critical presence. My dissertation builds on their work by engaging musical theater studies with the rigorous critical approaches found in the field of performance studies, and reconsidering both of them in light of citizenship theory's issues. As a reflexive concept that speaks to national, cultural, and canonical belonging, the relationship of *racialized citizenship* becomes another central theme for this dissertation.

Transracial Community, Women, and Dance Studies

My use of the term *transracial community* is inspired by the work of dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, by antiracist feminist rhetorician Aimee Carrillo Rowe, and by other interventions drawn from the field of dance studies. In her book, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (2003), Gottschild looks at the black dancing body as a "geography," and examines some key areas of that landscape--feet, butt, skin, hair, spirit.[46] For Gottschild, black and white bodies are metaphoric, ideological sites marked by notions of place and geography. In other words, black performance, particularly dance, makes visible how discourses of racial difference are locations mapped on both the social landscape and the body.

[46] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

I embrace much of Gottschild's formulations about the ideological mapping of the body. Her work illuminates, on the one hand, the way audiences and critics respond to moments in Africa-focused musicals that are centered on the anatomical body parts of their performers. On the other hand, her notion of the body as a continual marker of the idea of place supports my argument about the critical function of Africa-focused musicals and Africanist performance practices within Broadway musical theater history. However, it is not in metaphors of geography but in Gottschild's and Rowe's shared understanding of the flexible racial body where I locate my notion of transracial community.

Gottschild explains that body type is culturally conditioned but essentially fluid, and thus theoretically accessible to anyone regardless of race. The complete adoption of new movement is gradual, dependent on what Gottschild calls "generations of gesture."[47] Because these historically contingent gestures return us to locations in Europe and Africa there is a risk of reifying old stereotypes about movements and their biological rather than cultural and contingent origins. Ultimately we need new language and a new mode of understanding, and Gottschild's study pushes us to prepare for that and look for it, to work—as she says—through stereotype rather than avoiding it, even though she acknowledges the difficulty of talking about difference without being trapped within the rhetorical flaws and fragmented politics of identity discourse.

Rowe offers a solution for this trap of identity politics in her optimistic theory of "be-longing," which re-frames a person's initial understanding of individual identity as a desire for and mode of belonging to others, rather than framing identity as a rigid category of subjecthood that emphasizes the separate self in the world. Following Rowe, blackness as an identity can be seen as an understanding that reaches toward the other, and can even become the other in the moment of shared political work. Yet surprisingly, a person does not give up

[47] Ibid., 6-37.

their different self-ness in this moment of connection. Rowe understands this as being more than a discussion of affinity for the other or a fancy for identity tourism. In this action of moving toward the other I am accountable to the community I reach toward. I remain different yet I can also belong when I embrace the idea that my own subject position is only maintained in relation to others.

A move toward the other alters racial geography by altering the idea of position and subject. Questions open up about how much separation actually exists between the various identities in myself, identities that I am encouraged by society to imagine as territoried, and the other identities of other bodies I am continually in the process of longing to be a part of. The possibility of a community that is truly transracial in their sense of belonging emerges. Rowe recognizes that her view is radical, and she argues that it is through such radicalism that real counterhegemonic work and alliances must happen. Her work is useful here in the way it helps me to imagine a concept of blackness that accounts for 1) its durability and continuing use as a marker of racial place (as in Gottschild's geography), 2) its potential for organizing transracial alliances around its concerns, and 3) its flexibility and use in current politics and performance practices. Blackness is a concept that is increasingly stretched in certain instances to the point of breaking—leading some to question whether or not we have actually moved into a "post-race" era.

We can think of the tensile quality of blackness in terms of movement poetics, considering the strength and flexibility displayed in the body of the black dancer, or contemplate the literal strength and flexibility expressed in particular black choreographic languages. We can discuss the tensile quality of blackness in terms of economics, assessing here the way Africa-focused musicals embody various levels of black capital and new economic space within the industry of Broadway. However, it is in the tensile quality of

blackness, tested through three types of transracial summons—*improvisational identity*, *political alignment*, and *spiritual-moral leadership*—that Africa-focused musicals produced in the twenty-first century, such as *Fela!* and *The Book of Mormon* (2011), operate as living theory through their applied Africanist principles.

It is not unimportant that these ideas around the flexibility of identity and the body come from feminist scholars, and mainly from women who practice and write about dance. The field of dance and dance studies has, within the United States, been led for generations by women and by theoretical understandings drawn from lived practice in the performance of dance.[48] Much work in dance studies is meant to rescue the achievements of the many women (and men) who have been our great body theorists, but who face historical erasure by a larger theater historiography tradition that often does not include, understand, or appreciate the labor and theory of dance.[49] The understandings that Gottschild and others have worked out in the field of dance studies are critical for examinations of musical theater. Musical theater not only depends on dance as one of its important languages and ideological tools, but the presence of dance in musical theater has long been under-theorized and ignored.

Dance, as a non-spoken art, serves as a powerful ambassador in global conversations of difference and community. Often transcending difficulties of language and culture, the performing body "knows," as Johnson asserts, and also "speaks," as Gottschild argues. The

[48] Susan Leigh Foster's seminal book *Reading Dancing* (1986), for example, establishes dance as a "text" available for analysis, and gives a critical voice to dancers and choreographers whom, prior to this point in history, have been treated as fairly mute in writings about theater and dance. Foster's work established the role of the dance scholar and helped begin the emergent field of dance studies. Sally Banes' *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1987) was the first major history and critical study of postmodern dance, and put into practice the kind of careful critical considerations of dance Foster theorized.

[49] Anthea Kraut's book on Zora Neale Hurston, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (2008), explodes the conventions that typically define "the choreographer" in order to recognize Hurston's achievements in dance.

metaphors of the body used by Gottschild are significant in light of the legal and moral issues occupying scholars of critical race theory and post-colonial studies. If national and global boundaries are being crossed and re-imagined, then how is the racial identity of the body also shifting in terms of its racially-imposed map? How do Africa-focused musicals assist in this re-imagining? The discursive theme of transracial community encourages us, through an engagement with dance studies, to think of the performance of the traveling racial body as a physical articulation of social, national, and global boundaries and their expansions, and opens up previously restrictive aesthetic and political terms.

I see Africa-focused musicals as being complex conversations between theater artists and society about stereotypes of race. It is in the racially shared space of performance that the Africa-focused musical constructs a space of transracial community. My study will help us move toward the new language that Gottschild, Rowe and other feminist scholars anticipate. While musical theater can be seen as a cultural language, it is not a language of much use to us if it cannot speak critically of and forcefully to the pride as well as to the horror of racial mapping.

It may be apparent by now that all these discourses I have described are not exclusive to any single Africa-focused Broadway musical, nor are their connections to particular academic fields and theories significant only in the ways I have mentioned. As one of America's most traveled ideological and cultural commodities, and as a great storehouse of dissonant cultural memories, the Broadway musical gives us much to discuss in conversations about racial authenticity, racialized citizenship, cultural commodification, and transracial community. These discourses are at the center of the contested meanings that Africa-focused Broadway musicals help to build, expose, and replace.

Methodology

My methodological approach in this dissertation varies slightly with each chapter but in general draws on literary studies, performance studies, and dance studies in approaching the various texts I have encountered. Typically my research on a show has begun with a close and formalist reading of the show using whatever resources exist. If a show exists in production form I have either attended its live performance or I have viewed various recorded versions of its live performance at the Lincoln Center archives. In some cases I have had to rely primarily on newspaper articles and archived print documents. In all cases I have read the script or scenario of the musical and listened repeatedly to the recorded musical score. These primary materials were then supplemented by personal interviews with cast members when possible, or with other documents contemporaneous with the debut of the show. Three theorists in particular also helped to shape my research methods.

E. Patrick Johnson's work has been repeatedly useful. His notion of Black knowing-through-performance as marginalized knowledge undergirds my interest in the personal interview. Musicals written by and utilizing the labor of people from the African diaspora are not thoroughly documented relative to their white counterparts. Therefore, the one-on-one interviews I conducted with still-living theater artists involved in these musicals are a way to affirm the particular knowledge these artists possess and to preserve this knowing from the kinds of erasures that Johnson has theorized. My semiotic approach is inspired by Richard Dyer's work on popular cultural expression and the way musical theater productions register social desire and structures of feeling.[50] The analyses of songs and dances from Africa-focused musicals preserved through scripts, photographs, motion picture film, and

[50] Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 42.

eyewitness accounts follow Dyer's style in their attention to the way the scene's structure and elements model or articulate societal feeling.

Finally, for methodological approaches to the older, archival musicals from the first three decades of the twentieth century, I look to Daphne A. Brooks' study of black performance from 1850 to 1910 and the careful, imaginative analysis that she uses. For example, Brooks teases out the politics of place in *In Dahomey*'s settings and location changes, illuminating the way the show travels in reverse along the conventional narrative of racial progression for blacks. This narrative originally moved from Africa to the American South and Caribbean, and then to the cities of the American North, but is traced in reverse within *In Dahomey*'s plot. Inspired by Brooks' approach, my own explorations of place politics for *Kykunkor* helped lead me to my analysis of the wedding scene and shaped my larger argument about that musical's political nature.

Rather than maneuver through these case studies with the term 'black musical' (and by extension 'black play' and 'black theater') as my compass, which would only exclude important roads from my traveling critique, I prefer to frame my study around the interracial but yet more particular term "Africa-focused musical." I interrogate the presence of six Africa-focused musicals that span nearly the entire length of the musical's formal 100-year-plus history in the United States (from 1903 to 2009), and that are all distinguished by their appearance on a Broadway theater stage. I use the terms "musical," "musical theater," and the more colloquial term "show" interchangeably. I also use the terms "black" and "African diaspora" interchangeably, using "African American" in moments when that particular black cultural-political grouping is being discussed as distinct from other black cultural-political groups (for example, Afro-Caribbean or black African nationals).

Artistic Labors: Six Representative Africa-focused Broadway Musicals

My use of the phrase "artistic labors" in this dissertation's title refers to the politically imaginative work involved in creating Broadway musicals set in Africa. The Africa-focused musicals I study here are products of their time and these shows do not always deal progressively with the prevailing discourse. However, the creators of these shows all respond boldly to the prevailing discourse on black racial difference in some degree, and all offer representations of Africa that are meant, ultimately, to be anti-racist and celebratory of human diversity. The histories of these musicals also point to how a continued emphasis on racial difference, and on the spectacle of Africanist performance that is often made to serve as the evidence of this difference, can mask the nature of artistic achievement in these politically imaginative shows. The emphasis on racial difference distracts us from the fact that musical theater artists making Africa-focused musicals on Broadway have engaged in a century-long, important, shared project of ending racism and social oppression.

In chapter one, "Africa as a Rejection of Racial Authenticity*: In Dahomey* (1903) and *Kykunkor* (1934)," I look at racial authenticity as the prevailing national discourse on black racial difference for the first half of the twentieth century. In this nationalist discourse, black racial difference was seen as an un-integratable element since it is an unchanging and essential difference that cannot truly be American, or even civilized. "Africa" was viewed as an ethnically pure black space, and therefore is a version, though racist and insulting, of black nationhood in the imperial, public imagination. Black musical theater artists responded to this discourse by staging visions of a black nation free of racism (and, interestingly enough, absent of white people as well). Operating within the oppressive sign systems of the blackface minstrel and early vaudeville traditions, Jesse A. Shipp and the members of the

Williams and Walker company staged *In Dahomey* (1903) as a rejection of the prevailing racist discourse, subversively appealing to the language of authenticity to stage this rejection and present their vision of a potential, free black nation. Their use of authenticity as a strategy to affirm black nationalist prosperity survives in Asadata Dafora's *Kykunkor* (1934). While authenticity was used ironically within *In Dahomey*'s performances and marketing, the notion of authenticity was highlighted by Dafora in ways that seem to embrace the problematic language of anthropology and that have led to a misunderstanding of Dafora's achievements. By reading *Kykunkor* against *In Dahomey*, I argue that authenticity in black performance can be understood as a subversive strategy, and ultimately chapter one traces a conversation within Africa-focused musicals about nationhood and black transcultural belonging.

In chapter two, "Africa as a Redefinition of Racialized Citizenship: *Lost in the Stars* (1949) and *Sarafina!* (1988)," I look at the discourse of racialized citizenship, which I posit was the prevailing national discourse influencing Broadway's expressions of racial difference through the mid-century until the last decade of the twentieth century. At the center of conversations about citizenship was the problem of black urban space, perhaps most provocatively illustrated by the unrest in black urban youth. No Broadway musical captured the difficulties of citizenship, and the problems presented to it by worldwide global violence, like Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's *Lost in the Stars* (1949) and Mbogeni Ngema's *Sarafina!* (1988). Both musicals deal with apartheid South Africa as their subject. Both musicals feature black South African urban youths as criminalized figures at the center of the action, yet the divergent ways they deal with redefining the figure of the urban black

youth as a citizen speak provocatively to the shifting discourse on racist citizenship and its relationship to urban violence in the transatlantic world.

In chapter three, "Africa as a Celebration of Cultural Commodification: Disney's *The Lion King* (1997)," I consider the discourse of cultural commodification, of which the Disney Corporation's *The Lion King* (1997) is an internationally-recognized example. This discourse was, by the decade of the 1990s, firmly established in the national imagination, as conversations about authenticity, citizenship, and racial difference in the previous decades revealed the lucrative market for expressions of global culture and ethnicity. Directed by puppeteer and avant-garde theater artist Julie Taymor, *The Lion King* was a live stage adaptation of Disney's successful animated musical film of the same name. Response to the film was strong across racial lines and set box office records, and the history and reception of the film is essential to discussing the Broadway stage adaptation because the stage play, opening in 1997, inherited both the fan base of the film and the symbolic weight of its elements, but also the critical conversations and absences of certain kinds of critique within the popular reception of the film. *The Lion King* is a critical case study for a discussion of race, theater, and the transformation of cultural signifiers into global commodities.

In chapter four, "Africa as a Summoning to Transracial Community: *Fela!* (2009)" I consider the recent Broadway hit *Fela!* in light of what I consider to be the discourse of blackness refigured as a discourse about transracial community. Co-written by Caucasian American writer Jim Lewis and African American choreographer and dancer Bill T. Jones, who also served as the show's director, *Fela!* is the most recent and provocative attempt to stage Africa on Broadway, and hails its audience as a transracial collective while appearing

to celebrate the same forms of Africanist performance and tribal aesthetics that have affirmed black difference in the past. Blackness as an identity is stretched to include various transnational understandings of blackness, then stretched further to include the multiracial audience through its transcultural and transracial appeals to economic and environmental justice. Participants in culture conceptually endow upon the identity of "blackness" an ability to stretch and shift over time without becoming incoherent, and I call this persistent quality the "tensile strength" of blackness. It is this quality which helps enable the newly "black" moral identity of *Fela!*'s collective audience. Furthermore, the dynamics of *Fela!*'s plot are given shape by the presence of a mother figure who literally and figuratively "haunts" the action of the play as its spiritual center. However, Jones and Lewis' use of the mostly female ensemble of non-speaking dancers troubles their gender and sexuality ethics, even as these co-creators declare the tensile utility of blackness through *Fela!*'s interrogation of race, Western privilege, and Broadway's cultural and aesthetic hegemony.

In my conclusion, entitled "The Politics of Imagination in Africa-focused Broadway Musicals," I return to my discussion of how Africa-focused musicals inspire this study. These shows raise questions for me about who profits socially and materially from the complex ideological formations they create as they circulate and are consumed by Broadway's numerous ticket buyers. I discuss the four common measures of success by which Broadway musicals are typically evaluated, and argue that Africa-focused Broadway musicals should be evaluated primarily by their visionary success. I see visionary success—the acknowledgment of a show's political and aesthetic imagination—as the most frequently misunderstood aspect of the achievements of Africa-focused Broadway musicals, and my emphasis on the need to value the political imagination in each work is a response to what I

see as an overwhelming disregard for these shows. I close with a discussion of the most recent Africa-focused Broadway musical, *The Book of Mormon* (2011), and how that show represents both the continuing ideological pitfalls and the politically progressive achievements of imagining and employing Africa on Broadway.

These six shows have all had a significant impact symbolically and materially on Broadway culture and the lives of the people who performed them. I do not claim here to address all Africa-focused musicals ever made. I have chosen these six for their diversity of argument, historical spread, and for their importance in illustrating changing racial attitudes around blackness in American culture. What I ultimately hope for is a progressive musical theater history that acknowledges the range of achievements across gender, race, religion, and class, and can help build a canon that correctly identifies and values this range of achievement.

Chapter One – Africa as a Rejection of Racial Authenticity: *In Dahomey* (1903) and *Kykunkor* (1934)

Authenticity as Strategy

Asadata Dafora, born in the British-controlled colony of Sierra Leone, began his professional career as an interpreter of West African music and dance in Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, before attaining fame as a pioneer of black concert dance, Dafora originally billed himself as a performer of western classical vocal music. Although Dafora never spoke directly about his career change, his "origin myth" as an interpretive dancer is narrated in the following publicity statement. It is remarkable for the way "Africa" functions in the story as a kind of irresistible call to publicly perform an "authentic" blackness:

> He was in Kiel, Germany, in 1910 at the time of the completion of the Kiel Canal. One night while he was visiting one of the larger night clubs, the orchestra played some African medleys. Unable to contain himself, Dafora got up and danced to his native music--the dances of his own Africa never witnessed by those other than its native peoples. The audience, among whom was Crown Prince Wilhelm […] wildly applauded the young African and his spontaneous performance. The management of the night club urged him to remain to train a group of dancers for the grand opening of the Canal to be attended by the Kaiser. [1]

Initially, what is most noticeable is the presence of racial authenticity discourse, and the way this discourse marks the national and cultural boundaries for the participants in this historical scene. Dafora is the alien here—a visitor in a land whose inhabitants are in the midst of a large, nationalist project (the widening of the canal) that is meant to bring prosperity and recognition to their nation and to signal its modernity. Perhaps Dafora's presence as a "primitive" helps situate that modernity, since the dances he performs are

[1] Marcia Ethel Heard, "Asadata Dafora: African concert dance traditions in American concert dance" (PhD diss., New York University, School of Education, 1999), 214, ProQuest (AAT 9946944).

unknown to these modern Germans, "never witnessed by those other than its native peoples." The language is decidedly the language of anthropology and discovery, and it is at least partly through the presence of this imperial discourse that Dafora is being authorized, from the imagined standpoint of the Germans, as an "authentic" African. Upon further reflection, the scene tells us more than the fact that Dafora is embracing the primitive stereotypes that his spectacular performance, and perhaps even his presence, has generated. Dafora also seems to understand the way the western discourse of racial authenticity creates an absence he feels compelled to fill with his own critical presence. This origin story reveals, fascinatingly, that Asadata Dafora, like the Williams and Walker company before him, uses the discourse of racial authenticity to strategically choreograph his presence in modernity.

In this chapter, I argue that the concept of racial authenticity, which operates strategically in Jesse A. Shipp's Broadway musical *In Dahomey* (1903), also operates in Asadata Dafora's works for the musical theater stage, and is evident in his masterwork, *Kykunkor* (1934). By reading *Kykunkor* against *In Dahomey*, using theories about black performance as a mode of anti-racist resistance that have been articulated by Louis Chude-Sokei (2005) and Daphne A. Brooks (2006), *Kykunkor* can first be understood as a profound piece of political resistance and not merely a thrilling but vague affirmation of blackness. Then, by reading *Kykunkor* through the lens of authenticity provided by Muhammad Iqbal and Islamic scholar Robert Lee, the specific nature of Dafora's black politics in *Kykunkor* are also revealed.

Visible through acts One and Three, Dafora's first political plot gesture is an affirmation of pan-African cultural unity. The show begins and ends with a celebration of black culture. *Kykunkor* also affirms an anti-colonial stance, Dafora's second political plot gesture. He achieves this at the levels of narrative plot and aesthetic movement, primarily through Act

Two. The third gesture Dafora makes in the political plot scenario of *Kykunkor* is an affirmation of the liberating power of non-Western spirituality. While Act Three expresses both a sense of pan-cultural unity and anti-colonial protest, these two black (nationalist) communal values have been secured through the act of exorcism performed by the Witch Doctor. The witch doctor figure embodies a syncretic Islamic spirituality. The fact that the main character of the musical is freed from the witch Kykunkor's curse by a figure that embodies non-western spiritual practice is deeply significant and to my knowledge never credited in assessments of Asadata Dafora's work.

Finally, by reading *Kykunkor* and *In Dahomey* together, both shows can be more deeply understood as visions of black nationhood. The similarity of their African visions connected the early 1900s to a later, pre-World War II era, demonstrating a continuity of transnational Black resistance against a historically shifting backdrop of racialized nationalism. *Kykunkor* and *In Dahomey* are examples of the way many creators of Africa-focused Broadway musicals speak politically whenever they speak imaginatively about the African continent and its diaspora, despite the presence of national discourses of difference like racial authenticity, a discourse which can undermine or obscure their politicized theatrical projects.

My understanding of authenticity as a strategy here is borrowed in part from scholars working in post-colonial studies. The marking of a person, object, location, or event as "authentic" is an inherently political gesture, one that post-colonial theorist Gareth Griffiths (2002) identifies as a common practice in the colonialist and imperialist discourses of modernity.[2] While Griffiths sees authenticity as a tool of the oppressor, he does acknowledge

[2] Gareth Griffiths, "The Myth of Authenticity: Representation, discourse and social practice" in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality, eds.* Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 2002), 71-77. Griffiths' larger argument is that unless it is used as a specific political strategy, the mythic discourse of authenticity overpowers the weapons of the subaltern subject and becomes a form of discursive violence against the oppressed "in which the possibilities of subaltern speech are contained by the discourse of the oppressor."

its possibilities as a weapon of the subaltern when it is used as a "specific political strategy." E. Patrick Johnson, who also works with post-colonial theory, likewise sees the discourse of racial authenticity as a potentially progressive political strategy.[3] For Johnson, the invocation of an "authentically" black performance is a territorial boundary claim, and therefore is an inherently political and public performance of identitarian value, space, and power.[4] Scholars of the Williams and Walker company have argued successfully for essentially the same conclusion Griffiths and Johnson both reach. Unraveling the discourse of racial authenticity in early black performance, Louis Chude-Sokei (2005) and Daphne Brooks (2006) argue for a revised understanding of the Williams and Walker company's minstrelsy and vaudeville practices as subversive political expressions of agency and identitarian value. I aim to further Chude-Sokei and Brooks' understanding by situating their analyses within the larger discourse of authenticity enveloping black musical theatre artists in the first part of the twentieth century.

Because the work of Brooks and Chude-Sokei allows *In Dahomey* to be understood as a shrewd, nationalist satire on race masquerading as a naïve, minstrel-style musical farce, I adopt their theories and discuss *In Dahomey* here in order to search out the kinds of masquerading I suspect *Kykunkor* is engaging in, and ultimately to challenge the generally apolitical scholarship on Asadata Dafora. Once we remember that assertions of authenticity in black musicals are signals of the prevailing racial discourse and responses to it, then we can see *Kykunkor* as a political musical and not just an "authentic" presentation of African music, rituals, and dances. In 1910, which was during the height of the Williams and Walker company's fame in the United States and Great Britain, Asadata Dafora was discovering the

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[3] E Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 3.

[4] Ibid.

usefulness of the discourse of racial authenticity to further his own artistic and economic aims. Dafora's performed origin myth (if we accept it as such) resonates profoundly with the performer origin myth of Bert Williams and George Walker and their all-black theater company.

Bert Williams was born Egbert Austin Williams in the Bahamas, British West Indies in 1876,[5] but eventually made his way to California to look for work. George W. Walker, born in Lawrence, Kansas in 1872,[6] had already been performing as a minstrel in various traveling medicine shows. This travel eventually brought him to San Francisco in 1893, where the two young men met and became immediate friends and performance partners, earning money performing blackface minstrelsy at the turn of the century. The two men were famously known as "Williams and Walker," but also liked to refer to themselves in their own marketing materials as the "Two Real Coons." [7]

[5] Paul Finkelman, *Encyclopedia of African American History: 1896 to the Present; from the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1:332.

[6] T. Brooks, *Lost sounds: Blacks and the birth of the recording industry, 1890-1919* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 105.

[7] "Williams and Walker," Advertisement in *The Sun* (New York [N.Y.]) 1833-1916, December 19, 1897, 1, page 11, Image 1, Internet: The Library of Congress, http://www.*chroniclingamerica.loc.gov* (accessed July 24, 2013); James H. Dormon, "Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The "Coon Song" Phenomenon of the Gilded Age," in *American Quarterly* 40, no. 4: 450-71 (1988), 454. The popular trend in American performance was the predominately white-performed blackface minstrelsy that focused on the most extreme, racist caricatures of blacks. White minstrels were increasingly using the term "coon" in their racist depictions of black people, as tensions increased around the growing black populations of urban centers, particularly in the northern cities. The white public, hungry for what Dormon argues was a "sociopsychological mechanism for justifying segregation and subordination," made the white minstrels' "coon" characterizations popular, and created a new and more negative trend in both white and black minstrel practices at the end of the century. Williams and Walker took advantage of this trend and dubbed themselves "Two Real Coons." The name "Two Real Coons" played on white audience desire to see the men make clowns of themselves as "coons." While he does not make a specific argument about Williams and Walker, Dormon argues that a close reading of coon song lyrics collectively reveals the desire for white supremacy that explains the genre's overwhelming popularity in the 1890s

Their widely-circulated origin myth explains how the young duo were among those hired to perform as fake Africans in the Dahomey village exhibit at San Francisco's Mid-winter Fair, when the boat carrying the actual African dancers did not arrive to port on schedule.[8] Once the actual Africans arrived, Williams and Walker were relieved of their jobs, but they stayed at the fairgrounds to watch and study the Dahomey performers. This moment of transatlantic observation, although one-directional, fundamentally changed the men, who would continue to reference it throughout their performing careers together as a defining one. From that moment onward the duo intended to use their musical theater performance practice as a form of resistance against racist representations of "authentic" blackness. In his conversation with NAACP co-founder Mary White Ovington, Walker commented on their intentional artistic strategy saying,

> We discovered an important fact: that the hope of the colored performer must be in making a radical departure from the old time 'darky' style of singing and dancing. So we set ourselves the task of thinking along new lines.[9]

Part of this 'new line' approach was the assembly of an all-black musical theater company in order to create a kind of performance that had never been seen before: an anti-racist blackface minstrelsy. They assembled some of the finest black theatrical talent of the day, most notably: minstrel performer and writer Jesse A. Shipp, who became the company's longtime stage manager-director and book writer; dancer-choreographer Ada Overton-Walker (who married George Walker on June 26, 1899, around the time she joined the

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(Dormon, 466), and thus helps account for the financial success Williams and Walker were able to find by using, strategically, such a racially charged stage name.

[8] Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 223.

[9] Mary White Ovington, *Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1911), 130. Ovington's book is a chronicle of cultural life and social and economic circumstances of blacks in Manhattan during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.

company);[10] composer and actor Alex Rogers; composer Will Marion Cook; poet and lyricist Paul Lawrence Dunbar; Lottie Williams, Hattie McIntosh, and “Chinese specialist” George Caitlin. The Williams and Walker company eventually found their sought-after formula of popular but subversive comedy in a series of increasingly experimental musicals, with scripts and staging created by Jesse A. Shipp in collaboration with the other company members. The confirmation of the company's success was *In Dahomey*'s debut on Broadway, at the New York Theatre on February 18, 1903. Their strategic use of authenticity is discernible in the similar stage practices of Asadata Dafora, and this is evident when we consider Dafora’s life and return to his origin myth and the description of that performed moment in the German nightclub.

Asadata Dafora single handedly made a career for himself as America's foremost practitioner of African music and dance from 1929 until his death in 1965. Like the members of the Williams and Walker company, Asadata Dafora's early life was shaped by extensive travel, and like Bert Williams, Dafora's travel and subsequent life in New York City was informed by his outsider status as a non-American black immigrant whose family background and education was intercultural and transnational in nature. Dafora was born Asadata Austin Dafora Horton on August 4, 1890 in the British-occupied territory of Sierra Leone. Dafora grew up as a colonized citizen and did not see his home liberated until 1961. He was first educated in his home country at a Christian mission school, the Wesleyan Boys High School in Freetown, but spent his early young adult years up to the First World War studying traditional African dances and songs as well as western classical music. He studied at the famed La Scala in Milan, Italy, and performed in student productions there, before traveling to Germany. It was in Germany where Dafora presumably decided to pursue dance

[10] "The Late Ada Overton-Walker Is Laid To Rest In Cypress Hill Cemetery, New York City," *The Broad Ax*, sec. Editorial Columns, October 24, 1914.

rather than music as his primary professional endeavor once he received, in a German nightclub, that call from "Africa."

Imagined from Dafora's point of view, the choice of the white orchestra to play music they asserted was authentically African in nature (their "African medleys") created a critical dissonance for Dafora. His embodied response can be seen as an attempt to control the unruly discourse around him. If we assume that the orchestra's music was truly African, then at the very least the presence of the non-African dancing that surely accompanied the performance of this music in the club signaled the artifice of the moment for Dafora: real African music is properly paired with real African dancing, not with whatever dances we can assume the white German club patrons were performing to this music. If the music was actually from Africa, then one wonders how it was that the German musicians in this orchestra managed to come to know the music at all.

What is more likely is that the band played rhythmically enough for Dafora to improvise creatively to their music. Certainly, the music this presumably all-white orchestra played in 1910 could have been some form of early jazz, and its Africanist musical elements would then be perceived as decidedly non-European, and thus African. However, the discourse of racist authenticity insists on labeling the identity of the medleys, and essentializing Dafora's individual response to them through dance, as "African." This discursive moment of western desire for an African authentic created an ideological gap, which Dafora discovered—through the positive response he gained—that he could fill and manipulate with his own cultural capital. As a result, Dafora could gain a more lucrative outlet for his performance energies than the western classical music he had previously been focused on.

The Williams and Walker origin myth, emerging from their Dahomey village fairground performance, and the Asadata Dafora origin myth that emerges from his native dance

demonstration at a German nightclub, both occur in historical moments where cross-cultural gazing, spectatorial desire, and imperial assumptions about the inherent primitivity of black people threaten to contain these artists and limit their identities in social space. What is remarkable is the way these artists all chose to respond to imposing moments of racial discourse through performances of stereotyped African elements (non-western cultural citations, strange appearance, intense physicality) while also asserting their own unique, calculated, and modern black presences—an example of what Louis Chude-Sokei calls "activist primitivism."[11]

Both the Williams and Walker company and Asadata Dafora created a number of full-length musical theater works. Many of these were works that articulated concerns over cross-cultural relationships, national unity and belonging, and economic and political prosperity. Dafora made many presentations of pure concertized dance in his lifetime, and the members of the Williams and Walker company each had their own careers. With the exception of George Walker, who died much earlier than his peers, these black musical theater artists all enjoyed many other artistic collaborations in the musical theater world. The two more famous examples of this are Bert Williams' work with the Ziegfeld Follies from 1910-1913 and Dafora's work with Orson Welles in the Federal Theater Project/Negro Unit's "Zulu" stylization of *Macbeth* (1936).[12] However, I have chosen to limit my discussion in this chapter to *In Dahomey* and *Kykunkor* because they represent the height of popular and critical attention for their creators, if not also the height of their creators' economic success

[11] Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-On-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2005).

[12] Camille F. Forbes, "Dancing with" Racial Feet": Bert Williams and the Performance of Blackness," in *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 603-25. 605; Stephanie Leigh Batiste, *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 70-113.

in mainstream theater. As Regina Bendix reminds us, "Once a cultural good has been declared authentic the demand for it rises and it acquires a market value."[13] Responding to the prevailing, and lucrative, discourse of racist authenticity, the creators of both musicals manipulated that discourse to their benefit when they introduced their imagined African places into mainstream culture.

The Broadway productions of *In Dahomey* and *Kykunkor* do not survive in the form of recorded performances, so in this chapter I rely heavily on printed plot scenarios from the Broadway debuts, in addition to reports and descriptions of the shows in published newspaper reviews that were contemporary with the musicals. The full scenario of *Kykunkor* was provided in the Broadway playbill and also within the show's souvenir program book. Both of these sources describe the same basic story, though the souvenir program book offers extended detail on the musical's action in addition to extended dramaturgical information on the show and biographical information on the cast members. Both sources also provide valuable visual information in the form of production and marketing photos.

Recovering Jesse A. Shipp

My choice to focus on the narrative plot scenarios of these musicals also helps me advance a different but related argument: the historical erasure of Jesse A. Shipp's work in the Williams and Walker company and the general lack of appreciation given to the book portions of experimental, black-created musicals on Broadway. In most of the key critical works published on *In Dahomey* in recent years, the focus has either been on the complexity of Will Marion Cook's music or on the complexity of the performances by Bert Williams,

[13] Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 8.

George Walker, and Ada Overton-Walker.[14] Jesse A. Shipp's contributions are oddly often dismissed or ignored by scholars eager to advance arguments about the performances of identity within *In Dahomey*. Thomas Riis makes the most seductive of the historiographic omissions concerning Shipp by arguing that the various songs interpolated into the show were ever-changing and that the show drew its energy and essentially its form out of this shifting and improvisational experiment in black theatrical performance.[15] Yet the evidence of contemporaneous newspaper reviews and the few surviving scripts from the musical reveal that Shipp's plot, however "flimsy" its detractors seem to feel it is, was one of the few unchanging elements of the show. For audiences attending *In Dahomey* before its Broadway opening and during the Broadway run and subsequent tour, the unique and relatively unchanging plot was as much a part of what they understood *In Dahomey* to be as the thrilling performances within it were.

I take particular issue with the way that scholars attribute achievements of the plot and dialogue to the company in general and consistently fail to acknowledge Jesse A. Shipp by name. Along with Will Marion Cook, Shipp was an elder statesman of the company, who had performed as a professional minstrel longer than any of the other company members. He was hired by Williams and Walker specifically to write for them and direct their collaborative musicals, and continued to direct and stage manage theater work in New York

[14] Brooks (2006) and Krasner (2002) examine the artistry of Ada Overton-Walker in some detail. Significant studies on other company members include a biography of Paul Lawrence Dunbar by Gentry (1993), a more recent monograph on Marion Cook by Carter (2008), and a handful of works on Bert Williams, including Charters, (1970), Smith (1992), Chude-Sokei (2005), and Forbes (2010). No detailed chapter or book-length study has yet been published on Lottie Williams, Alex Rogers, Jesse A. Shipp, or even on Williams' partner George Walker. In my mind these facts, among others, support the argument for more scholarship on early black musical theater artists.

[15] Will Marion Cook, Jesse Shipp, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Thomas Laurence Riis, Alex Rogers, James Vaughan, and John Leubrie Hill, *The Music and Scripts of in Dahomey,* Vol. 5: (Middletown, WI: AR Editions, Inc., 1996), xiv-xvi.

City until his death. Shipp is officially listed on the company payroll as “stage manager,” and I would argue this title speaks more to the collaborative nature of Shipp's directing style and less to an image of Shipp—not supported by any historical evidence—that he did little more than serve as a backstage administrator and occasional minor character player. Sylvester Russell was the nation's first professional black theater critic who wrote often about the Williams and Walker company and is frequently cited by scholars looking at early twentieth century black performance. Russell regularly acknowledged Jesse A. Shipp's significance and wrote, for example, that

> [George] Walker had discovered in Shipp the one essential to his success and the greatest secret of his power. It was the fertile brain of Jesse A. Shipp that kept the literary productive steam supplied with which to launch the great Williams and Walker ship and keep it afloat upon a mighty sea.[16]

Shipp was one of five collaborators who created the first black musical comedy produced, written, and performed by black people: *A Trip to Coontown* (1897).[17] Williams and Walker inconsistently credited Shipp in their various interviews over the years, and I believe that fact has contributed to the journalistic and scholarly silence around Shipp's contributions.[18]

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[16] Sylvester Russell, "The Williams and Walker of the Future," *Chicago Defender*, sec. Musical and Dramatic, April 22, 1911.

[17] Sylvester Russell, "Welcome Death! Slogan of Robert Cole," *The Freeman*, sec. Gossip of the Stage, August 12, 1911.

[18] Sylvester Russell, "A Quiet Evening With Jesse Shipp," *The Freeman*, sec. The Stage, September 16, 1905. In his article for *The Freeman*, Sylvester Russell comments that even during the height of the Williams and Walker company fame, “Jesse A. Shipp is quite the brightest personage in the company of which he is a member. Mr. Shipp […] has been less heralded and talked about that any other actor of his ability.” Of the contemporary scholars writing about the Williams and Walker company, Daphne A. Brooks has done the most significant work to date in affirming the integrity and metaphoric power of *In Dahomey*'s plot, and while she also fails to reference Shipp while addressing a plot issue, I follow her here in arguing that the narrative plots of *In Dahomey* and *Kykunkor* are keys to understanding the intentions of their creators.

Shipp's plot scenario for *In Dahomey* (1903), into which a number of different songs were interpolated, concerns two unemployed black men named Rareback and Shylock (played in the production by Walker and Williams) who have tried a range of financial schemes and held a dizzying array of jobs and identities in their quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in racially segregated America.[19] At the beginning of the musical the duo has migrated to Boston where they join a group of middle-class blacks who have formed an African colonization society. This group, eager to change residence at the promise of better living elsewhere, leaves Boston for a plantation in Florida. It is from the American south that the group eventually leaves for Dahomey. The musical ends, ambiguously, with a long sequence of songs and dances set in Dahomey. The danced ending suggests this group has found a new sense of self and prosperity in Africa, if not in the journey to Africa itself. This imagined Africa is an idealized space, not a historical Africa (one already colonized by white, imperialist nations), which is the entire point. The abstraction of Africa into a sign for black nationalist reflection is more sharply edged due to its positioning in the white nationalist space of the Broadway house. The structure of Shipp's narrative raises the questions, "Where, how, and in what form of expression will we find our real black nation?" I suggest that Shipp does not offer the audience a concrete resolution to these questions precisely because it is the raising of these questions that is the author's ideological agenda. In my view, these questions about the location of black modernity and the rendering of Africa as an ideological space of black potential are at the crux of playwright-director Jesse A. Shipp's achievement with *In Dahomey*.

Recovering Jesse A. Shipp's presence in musical theater history means recovering a sense of the important black labor in American theater. My use of "employing" in this

[19] Will Marion Cook, et al., *The Music and Scripts of in Dahomey*, xiv.

study's title is in part a reference to the specific labors of African diaspora artists that get lost and buried beneath the historical spectacle of Africa-focused Broadway musicals. Shipp wrote all the major books for the Williams and Walker company musicals, and after the company disbanded Shipp stayed in New York City to work as a highly-regarded stage manager, director, and producer for a number of vaudeville groups. As an actor, Shipp continued to perform in various shows, originating the roles of Abraham and the Archangel in Marc Connelly's Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play *Green Pastures* (1930),[20] and had advised Connelly in the casting of his play.[21] Shipp was also instrumental in establishing the Florence Mills Memorial Fund to finance the building of a home for Negro entertainers.[22] It is a sad irony that someone who worked as hard as Shipp did to see other black performers acknowledged for their labor would be so unacknowledged in the otherwise thorough historical studies of the most important shows he performed in and helped create. "Employing Africa" is a conscious reference to the many invisible labors of black artists in the archival record. This dissertation aims to make those contributions visible. Shipp's book and ambitious stage direction for *In Dahomey*, fulfilled in performance through his team of collaborators, allows us to accept the possibility that an imagined Africa, staged in front of a mostly white Broadway audience in the midst of larger anti-black oppression and segregation, can help create a politically charged, progressive space.

[20] J. Brooks Atkinson, "New Negro Drama of Sublime Beauty," *New York Times*, February 27, 1930, (1923-Current File) ed. ProQuest Historical Newspapers; *New York Times* (1851-2009), 20.

[21] "Jesse A. Shipp Dead; Actor and Writer," *New York Times*, May 3, 1934, (1923-Current File) ed. ProQuest Historical Newspapers; *New York Times* (1851-2009). 22.

[22] "Aid Florence Mills Fund," *New York Times,* December 16, 1929, (1923-Current File) ed. ProQuest Historical Newspapers; *New York Times* (1851-2009). 34.

Understanding In Dahomey as a Critical Forerunner of Kykunkor

I see the work Daphne A. Brooks and Louis Chude-Sokei have done on *In Dahomey* as complementary to one another and useful. Brooks argues that the performers of *In Dahomey* rendered ideologically strange any fixed notions of race while their show traveled as transatlantic cultural capital. For example, the final twenty minutes of the musical is an extended cakewalk dance sequence, in which the cast members come out and move around the stage in pairs, in what Brooks calls "a performance of travel that literally walked the color line of identity politics."[23] A single-page review of the show in *Life* magazine on March 12, 1903, panned the entire show, and its unnamed author made a particular point of criticizing this transgressive moment of black dance by saying, ""*In Dahomey"* makes no effort to call out what *really characteristic talents* might possibly exist in the large number of negroes crowded on the stage. There is none of the good dancing *one might expect*" (emphasis mine).[24] Brooks has identified the issue here. The reviewer's disdain, expressed in other lines like, "These colored people give simply a pitiful exhibition of their childish race vanity," is a response to the identity politics that were creatively re-written before the audience. Brooks' argument for the cakewalk finale is that the dance "rewrites minstrelsy's grotesque lampooning of black soldiers, marching units, and parades."[25] Brooks explains that the cakewalk scene, like the other strange performances of race she studies, is not just a physically expressive act but an ideologically effective one. The *Life* reviewer was objecting to the potential threat inherent in this public performance, which rendered strange and unfamiliar the prevailing idea of black racial difference held by the reviewer.

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[23] Ibid., 272.

[24] "The Negro on Broadway," in *Life* (1883 – 1936), Mar. 12, 1903, 41, 1063, ed. American Periodicals, 224.

[25] Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 275.

Louis Chude-Sokei does not do close readings of the show in his book-length study of Bert Williams, but his observations also help illuminate the cakewalk finale. For Chude-Sokei, *In Dahomey* does more than render the prevailing notion of race as strange and unstable (as Brooks, in part, argues). Bert Williams' black-on-black masquerade of the European American idea of an African American renders the category of "American" unstable as well. In other words, as a black man who was not American, Williams' performance of a white American idea of a black American highlights the falsity of "American" and the assumed group solidarity and national definitions based on race. Based on Chude-Sokei's observations, I believe the final cakewalk dance of *In Dahomey*, with its promenades around the stage, serves as a physicalized metaphor for the flux of national identities in the making. These identities are not shapeless, since the cakewalk does have an actual form, but they are open and supportive of individual divergences, since the dance is designed to embrace moments of Africanist improvisation throughout.

From either Chude-Sokei's or Brooks' view, the musical *In Dahomey* is meant to be rescued from a view of performance history that does not fully appreciate the musical's significance to our transatlantic social imagination, and I work from both of these scholars in affirming the imaginative power of *In Dahomey* and the strategic way Shipp and the Williams and Walker company made ideas about black modernity and authenticity visible through musical theater form. Understanding the notion of the strategic use of authenticity and its employment within *In Dahomey* is the first step in illuminating the political nature of Dafora's *Kykunkor*.

Africa as Black Nationalism

> For the first time, large segments of the African American population lived in close proximity; no longer divided by plantations and farms, African Americans were now living in closely knit communities. Proximity was a cathartic social redefinition.
>
> —David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant*[26]

Krasner uses the term "proximity" to discuss the way black-on-black closeness in migration-swelled cities was an important catalyst for the cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance. As his quote here suggests, what was "cathartic" about the new close proximity urban blacks were encountering was the lived experience of large black communities "no longer divided." By the turn of the century, a number of factors led to New York's population boom and the formation of the city-within-a-city that was Harlem: a tremendous influx of immigrants into the city; increased numbers of southern blacks coming into the city looking for better housing and better employment opportunities; and multiple housing, employment, and public policy practices that discriminated against black people. These forces squeezed the black population into the area called Harlem and into a few other tightly bounded neighborhoods in New York City. The sudden visible increase of black people (all-black streets, more blacks searching publicly for work) became a social crisis for many white New Yorkers, and during the first decade of the twentieth century, New York City was a site of tremendous racial tension. For example, in 1900 a massive race riot erupted in the city, and in 1905 an even more volatile race riot occurred, resulting in many lynchings and hospitalizations.[27] The riots were instrumental in spurring the creation of organizations such as the NAACP, explicitly designed to end racial violence and discrimination against New

[26] David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[27] Ovington, *Half a Man,* 199.

York City's black citizens, who did not feel safe on their own streets at the time.[28] *In Dahomey* arrived on Broadway in 1903, "sandwiched" between the city's race riots in 1900 and 1905, and was thus staged in a cultural climate where the "negro problem" for many was a problem about what to do to keep the black population from occupying any more of the spaces white citizens already shared with them uneasily.

The imagined community staged within *In Dahomey*'s African third act was not merely an all-black community, which was progressive and suggestive enough, but was also an occupying community of war-like people, where black women were Amazons, black men were caboceers (chiefs), and this new army of empowered people celebrated a black imperial power named, provocatively, "King-Eat-Em-All." Any suggestion that the cannibals on stage were merely absurd and harmless savages could be challenged by literally filling the stage space during the song, as the bodies of the company members enacted a celebratory and thoroughly political moment of physical presence in a segregated Broadway theater.

At that time, white audience members could purchase seats anywhere in a Broadway theater house,[29] while black audience members were either not sold tickets at all to the first-rate theaters; or if they were, since segregation was irregularly practiced in New York City,

[28] Ibid., 200.

[29] "At the Theaters: The Local Theater's Musical Notes Cecilia Loftus..." in *San Francisco Chronicle* (1869-Current File); Mar 8, 1903; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *San Francisco Chronicle* (1865-1922),19. The segregated theater seating for Broadway houses at this time is described in a newspaper article that actually references *In Dahomey*. Though still limited, additional seating was made available to blacks for the musical's Broadway debut, but the concern this potentially caused white patrons explains the mention of *In Dahomey*'s modified seating in the following *San Francisco Chronicle* description: "The color line in the New York Theater, drawn for William and Walker's engagement in "In Dahomey," gives the lower floor, orchestra and orchestra circle, all boxes except the top tier, two sections of the dress circle and one section of the balcony exclusively to whites. This leaves one section of the balcony and the entire gallery for the Negroes. No colored person is admitted to the sections reserved for the whites, and no white person is admitted to the parts of the house reserved for negroes."

then they were merely sold seats in the uppermost row of the balcony or gallery, derogatorily referred to by whites as "nigger heaven"[30] or the "peanut gallery."[31]

As far as I can discern from reviews at the time and from the scenario description, *In Dahomey*'s closing song and dance is also free of any anti-black humor. The citizens of Dahomey are purely celebrating, and whatever minstrel antics they might engage in during the scene do not undercut the earnestness of their proud display of bodies and imperial desire. The focus is on the spectacle being created. The sound of the cheering black patrons coming from the back of the house, combined with the celebratory scene itself, would certainly have made for strange minstrelsy in the minds of some of the white patrons. An unnamed *New York Times* reviewer was aware of the provocative martial feeling of the African scene and seems to use the notion of territory in the review's heading and subheadings:

DAHOMEY ON BROADWAY
Williams and Walker Make an Opening at the New York Theatre and Hold it
All Negro Book and Music Played by an All-Negro Cast—
The Negroes in the Audience Were in Heaven.[32]

[30] "A Professor's Dab at College Slang," in *The Sun,* Wed. July 18, 1900 (New York, 1900), 6. The article mentions the popular use of the slang word "nigger heaven" in reference to the furthest balcony seating in a theater.

[31] "Man-On-The-Corner: Discusses The Washington Theaters," *The Colored American* (National Negro Newspaper) Vol. 9, No. 32. Washington, D.C. Nov. 29, 1902 (Washington, D.C., 1902). The author of the article refers to the furthest balcony seating as "the peanut gallery," and describes the injustice of being forced to sit there as a black person when rows immediately in front of this section sit vacant.

[32] "Dahomey on Broadway" in *New York Times* (1837-1922); Feb 19, 1903; ProQuest Historical Newspapers. *New York Times* (1851-2006) 9.

In 1890s, the French were completing their subjugation of Dahomey and formally disbanding the kingdom,[33] so by the turn of the century New Yorkers had been hearing about Dahomey for a number of years through sensationalist travel writings and equally sensational news reports that described England's and France's difficulties with the region. These news reports regularly featured terms like “atrocities” and “peril” in their headlines.[34] While terms like “opening” and the phrase “hold it” are common theater usages, the first subheading of the review where these words appear also seems to speaks of the duo in the language of battlefield strategy, wherein the space of the New York Theatre becomes a kind of tactical front of racial conflict—which, as I am suggesting, it actually was in many ways. By speaking of Williams and Walker as opening and holding the space of the New York Theatre, the reporter implies that a particular kind of racial victory has been won, which is affirmed by the second subheading that describes how Negroes responding to the show's debut were collectively “in Heaven.” The sense of victory allows the reporter to describe the show in celebratory terms, but the suggestion of the show as a site of social battle also points to the dominant cultural antagonism aimed at the Williams and Walker company's imagined (and actual) ideological effort. In the second line of the review's body text, the reporter points out how buzz about the show had already posed threats of racial conflict, writing, “Since it was announced that Williams and Walker, with their all-musical comedy, “In Dahomey,” were booked to appear at the New York Theatre, there have been times when the trouble-breeders have foreboded a race war. But all went merrily last night.”[35] The reporter

[33] "The Dahomeyans Beaten," *New York Times* (1857-1922), 1892 Oct 08 1892; ProQuest Historical Newspapers. *New York Times* (1851-2006) 1.

[34] "French Peril in Dahomey," *New York Times* (1857-1922), 1892 Apr 26 1892; ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *New York Times* (1851-2006) 2.

[35] “Dahomey on Broadway,” *New York Times* (1837-1922); Feb 19, 1903; ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *New York Times* (1851-2006) 9.

distances himself or herself from the “trouble-breeders” of the city, suggesting that the reporter and their ideal *New York Times* reader are more enlightened or more tolerant than their aggressively racist neighbors. But the mention of a race war indicates the degree to which more lynchings and forms of racial violence threatened to engulf black New Yorkers at the turn of the century—which it did only two years later with the riot of 1905.

By suggesting the notion of war and pleasure simultaneously, the reviewer inadvertently signals the way the audience might associate a war-like, black nation with the vision of Africa on stage in *In Dahomey*. The black audience's expression of pride, through their presence and through their collective “roar” of appreciation, is understood by the reviewer as a possible expression of “war”. The anxiety that this might cause the white audience is addressed by the reviewer's reference to the pleasure of racial control and clarity inside the New York Theatre, saying, “The footlights drew a sharp color line, and will doubtless continue to do so.”

For blacks, living in Harlem was thus an experience that, at least some of the time, felt like life in a new black nation. In addition, many black artists wrestling with national identity found that the idea of Africa as a romanticized and nationalized trope was an efficient way to describe the new culture of Harlem they were experiencing within a segregated America. The symbolic and rhetorical space of Africa could become their place, however contested, within the even more contested place of North America, and so shows like *In Dahomey* circulated within a cultural space in which “Africa” was being affirmed as important, if not always explicitly central, to the urban life in black Harlem.

While the physical and visual reality of Harlem in the early decades of the twentieth century helped generate a sense of black cultural unity and political strength, this emergent sense of black nationhood was further reinforced by the imperial discourse of racial

authenticity itself. This discourse, meant to contain black identity in restrictive assumptions of primitivity and inferiority, characterizes the space of black political autonomy as un-integratable into the idea of American nationhood. In this way, the discourse of racial authenticity imagines ethnically pure spaces of governance. In the case of *In Dahomey*, for example, white ticket-buyers desired an encounter with an all-black space meant to entertain through minstrelsy's alignment of blackness with clownishness, thereby affirming Africa's diaspora as a people in need of control and white guidance. With *Kykunkor*, many ticket-buyers were even more convinced that what they were watching was not at all fictive but a slice of real, authentic African blackness. *In Dahomey* and *Kykunkor* appear on the surface to stage aspects of the racist exotic, yet both musicals present aesthetic visions of Africa where black citizen-inhabitants are racially equal and where freedom and prosperity are championed as the prevailing values. In both musicals Africa is re-imagined as a space of possibility, or at least as a space free of external cultural control. The notion of a space of black governance, which is an expression of black nationalist desire, is key to the discursive and anti-racist work in these musicals. In contrast to ethnological shows and white minstrelsy that characterized Africanist culture as savage, hyper-sexual, and unintelligent, and against the reality of civic violence and lynchings, these fictionalized Africas exist as utopias which sound ideologically identical to utopian descriptions of the United States. Because colonial control is absent from the stated plot of the musicals, each of these all-black musicals can be further understood as an explicit imagining of a black national space where a white, colonial history is non-existent. While there are some imperialist gestures in both musicals, the creators of *In Dahomey* and *Kykunkor* rejected anti-black racist representation, and they accomplished this through constructions of Africa that affirm black modernist and black nationalist desires.

Kykunkor and the Shield of Authenticity

It is productive to talk about the image of the mask in discussions of minstrelsy and *In Dahomey*, since Bert Williams made the blackface mask central to his performance practice and essential to his comic subversions of racism. The idea of masquerade, as Chude-Sokei has shown, characterized the Williams and Walker company's use of racist authenticity in *In Dahomey*.[36] However, Asadata Dafora's approach was more direct, and I think the image of the shield is perhaps more useful in discussing Dafora's strategic practice rather than the mask. A shield is a defensive weapon, and like a mask can offer a degree of concealment. Unlike a mask, a shield is designed to move through space with significantly more independence from the bearer, allowing its bearer to advance within a field of aggression while also withstanding or blocking attacks. A bearer of a shield can also be caught behind it. Like Bert Williams' blackface mask, I argue that Asadata Dafora's use of authenticity has greatly contributed to his under-appreciation in performance history.

Because *Kykunkor* was a musical created for American audiences with the intention that it would eventually reach Broadway, the show can be easily understood as expressing a basic, pan-African sensibility, at least on the level of celebrating the transatlantic presence of black people. However, critical examination of what Dafora's pan-Africanism entails, or the degree to which *Kykunkor* is expressive of other political values, never seems to progress beyond this initial and simplistic assessment. For example, Dafora's anti-colonialism is also expressed in his liberation-oriented community work in Harlem, which scholars like Graff (1999), having assumed the entirely apolitical nature of *Kykunkor* as an "authentic" folk piece, wholly ignore.[37]

[36] Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky,"* 6.

There are generally two camps of scholars who write about Dafora. One group, many of whom are writing out of the field of dance studies, consists of the more astute scholars like Franko (1997) and Heard (1999), who acknowledge the way Dafora's pan-cultural values[38] are evident in *Kykunkor*'s aesthetics. The other group consists of scholars who study early twentieth century American society's interest in folk forms and anthropology and thus understand Dafora's presence in modern American dance history as an example of the folk. Corbould (2009), for example, uses *Kykunkor* as an example of the way black artists were creating their own traditions in the early twentieth century. She acknowledges Dafora's own public statements in which he aimed to present "authentic African art."[39] Although Corbould (2009), Stiehl (2009), and Graff (1997) register a connection between Dafora's public statements on authenticity and the dominant desire for displays of black (primitive) authenticity, they do not interrogate this connection and thus interpret Dafora's statements primarily as expressions of his aesthetic and almost apolitical interests. Dafora and his aesthetic practices get praised for being expressions of "African" or "Pan-African" identity in a way that mirror the kinds of critiques normally made about Africanist performance within the discourse of racial authenticity. In other words, *Kykunkor* is still discussed in

[37]Graff's omission of Dafora and his community work is particularly bothersome, since her important book details the overtly political nature of modern dance in New York City during the 1930s and 1940s, and effectively makes the argument that a significant portion of that work—including the work of Martha Graham—had connections to leftist politics and the city's labor movement. Graff makes a passing mention of Dafora in her discussion of the Federal Theater Project. However, a fuller discussion of Dafora and his community involvement would enrich Graff's understanding of black dance in the era she considers.

[38] Both Franko and Heard argue for Dafora's establishment in theater and dance history as a modern dance pioneer and understand Dafora's pan-Africanism to be evident in his Africanist dance aesthetic. Franko additionally points out the pan-African make-up of his ensemble, while Heard points to Dafora's efforts to help establish the pan-African organization, Academy of African Arts.

[39] Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 191-192.

published dance scholarship as an example of "authentic" black dance, with scholars like Graff et al. acknowledging Dafora's artistic aims while overlooking his political ones. Dance scholars have also tended to ignore Asadata Dafora as a pioneer of dance-centered American musical theater as well as of modern African concert music.[40] As a result of this limiting view of Dafora, dance scholars have largely missed opportunities to discuss the ways *Kykunkor* is deeply political.

Despite his multicultural heritage and transatlantic education and experience, Asadata Dafora used the discourse of racial authenticity to create and market himself as an authority on African dance. A typescript page lists a biographical paragraph on Dafora, stating that he is the "only authentic African dancer in America." The paragraph suggests he is an import direct from Africa, not a world traveler. The emphasis in the souvenir program book on the authenticity and presence of tradition in *Kykunkor* masks the musical's nature as an original, modern dance creation by Dafora, and makes Dafora's politics harder to discern at first glance.

Dafora's self-marketing continually reveals his political nature. Thomas J. Aldridge, Traveling Commissioner for the British government, wrote about Sierra Leonean culture in 1910, when Dafora was 21 and had just recently begun his international traveling and performing. Aldridge explains that Sierra Leoneans, particularly the educated and multicultural Krio class of which Dafora was a member, would never self-identify as "native."[41] Their insistence on drawing a distinction between themselves, a culturally hybrid

[40] Stiehl (2009) and Perpener are exceptions here. Stiehl argues that *Kykunkor* expanded the boundaries of concert dance while also hinting at the possibilities dance could have in structuring Broadway musical theater form. Perpener argues that Dafora was the first native Africa to strongly influence American culture.

[41] Thomas Joshua Aldridge, *A Transformed Colony: Sierra Leone as it was, as it is: its progress, peoples, native customs and undeveloped wealth* (London: Seely and Co. Limited, 1910). 44.

people, and those tribes they viewed as indigenous and in many cases inferior, speaks to the complicated politics of the Freetown that was Asadata Dafora's home. Yet Dafora's insistence in describing himself as native and particularly as Temne (the tribe indigenous to the geographic area of Freetown) within his press materials is a potential act of protest against the colonial reorganization of his society by the British, against their privileging of the hybrid class—whose members the government identifies as "Sierra Leoneans" and not as "natives"—and may be an expression of Dafora's support of the most disenfranchised groups in his home country.[42] Asadata Dafora's self-identification as native is a mark of his awareness of and political reaction to his intersectionality. He chooses a self-identification that does not signal his complex multicultural heritage but signals instead a more simply defined, "authentically" African tribal self.

Dafora's awareness of the politics involved in using racial authenticity discourse is apparent when we return once again to his origin myth at the German nightclub. Dafora's response to the music is described in his publicity statement as a racially essentialized, emotional, and kinesthetic reaction—he is "unable to contain himself."[43] The discourse of racial authenticity here asserts Dafora's naturalness as a black man expressing himself with emotional abandon and physical inventiveness, but masks the clues that speak to Dafora's manipulation of his supposed "spontaneous performance." The word "spontaneous" works on two levels here. It emphasizes that Dafora's dancing is both an essential and natural quality of his being African, and that as an African this quality is perhaps beyond his rational control to "contain" and therefore to shape, since "spontaneous" also suggests the lack of choreographic intention and the untutored quality of one who does not dance as an art form

[42] Aldridge, *A Transformed Colony*, 46.

[43] Heard, *Asadata Dafora,* 214.

but instead dances out of some sort of racial impulse. However, the presence of the word "spontaneous" is also a flag marking Dafora's manipulation of racial authenticity discourse since the text appears as part of the promotional material he has authorized.

Asadata Dafora was thus a transatlantic performer educated in both Africa and Europe and was well-aware of the dominant, imperial conception of the African authentic. Yet scholars still tend to discuss Dafora as though his deployment of the term "authentic" in his press materials was entirely oblivious to the connotations and resonances the term had for the potential ticket-buyers for his productions. It is as if acknowledging Dafora's fabrications or manipulations would somehow render the Africanity of his art inert. It is entirely possible to praise Dafora's African retentions within his unique modernist art and movement technique (his bearing of a "shield" of Africanist aesthetics), while also appreciating what I see as Dafora's political "shield": his strategic use of the discourse of racial authenticity.

To assume, for example, that *Kykunkor* is "simply about a wedding" is to make the assumption that a wedding is not a highly important political act, or at least to argue without evidence that *Kykunkor*'s wedding—between members of two tribes who have different languages and customs—is a neutral event free of political ideology. Scholars seem to ignore the idea of a political meaning in *Kykunkor* without even researching information on the Temne and Mende tribal groups. No one seems to ask the question why, with the opportunity before him to stage a full-length musical in New York City, would he choose this particular African folk tale as a vehicle for his theatrical expression? Not many scholars consider his dance work as art being made within the context of his transnational, politicized life in Harlem—though that is fortunately changing with scholars like Marcia Heard, Mark Franko, Thomas DeFrantz, and others who acknowledge the multivalent and political Dafora. Both Franko (1997) and Heard (1999), for example, make the case that Dafora's

misunderstood African aesthetics also reflect a proto-pan-African sensibility, and my work in this chapter compliments their own by affirming the decidedly anti-colonial and thoroughly ideological, as well as expressive, nature of Asadata Dafora's masterwork, *Kykunkor*.

By the time *Kykunkor* reached a Broadway house, stage primitivism had been used for decades in black performance, sometimes strategically resistant to racist ideology and sometimes not. Audiences and critics, both black and white, read *Kykunkor* against the popular, imperial discourse of primitivism which seemed at first glance to be sufficient for understanding his choice of traditional setting (an African village) and story-line (the communal ritual of a wedding). However, if we read the musical as a political allegory, then Dafora's message of pan-African cultural unity and anti-colonial sentiment seems clear. The fact that Dafora was ambivalent about the application of the label "primitive" to his work, despite allowing that discourse to appear in his marketing materials, suggests the way Dafora may have understood racial authenticity as a discourse he could potentially manipulate, and should by itself warrant a closer look at *Kykunkor*.[44]

The lens through which we can view these performances, I argue, is resistant authenticity, which is inherently modern. My thinking about resistant authenticity is inspired by Middle East political scholar Robert Lee (1997), who draws heavily from early twentieth century poet-philosopher Allama Muhammad Iqbal to suggest a decidedly non-white and non-Western authenticity. By aligning traditional tribal and Islamic practices with modernity,

[44] *Kykunkor* (souvenir program), Schomberg Center, n.d., pg. 3. A narrative description of Dafora's view on the primitive labeling issue is given in the souvenir program for *Kykunkor*. The anecdote reads, "Quiet and composed, and very well-dressed off-stage, he [Dafora] listens to dressing room visitors who express their enthusiasm for his work and their amazement at the revelation that Africa may not be so 'barbaric.' "Barbarism?" he murmurs, "but there are lynchings in this country. And voodooism? But that is a real religion, practiced as any other religion is practiced."

Lee argues that Iqbal offers an exemplary, resistant notion of authenticity—one that is in conversation with western philosophical thought, but that serves as a reflexive, critical response. Lee explains that modern Muslim communities, rejecting the modernity-tradition dichotomy they inherited from European philosophers and seeking an authenticity (truth) based on an internal rather than external standard, now struggle with the problem of culturally particular truths as their basis for political construction and relationship in the world.[45] This line of thinking also attends considerations of Asadata Dafora's work. As the scenes of wedding preparation show, *Kykunkor* embraces, on the one hand, traditional aspects that appear to be primitivist as defined by the western modernist aesthetic. On the other hand, the later events in the musical assert an anti-primitivist stance alongside a proclamation of authenticity explicitly associated with Africa. What kind of authenticity is this, then, that Dafora sees as connected to African and Islamic tradition but is also somehow modern and not at all "primitive"?

While Lee offers no clear solutions, he sees in Muhammad Iqbal's life, philosophy, and poetry a positive example of activating authenticity through a self-agency that is assisted, in Iqbal's case, by his own transcultural borrowing.[46] This image of transcultural borrowing grounded in a freely chosen but tradition-honoring sense of self is not only Lee's characterization of Iqbal but serves as a useful way of thinking about Dafora's modernism. The idea of authenticity implies, according to Lee, a self-standard.[47] In this sense, authenticity serves as a form of protection—like the shield image I have invoked for Dafora. Iqbal is an artist, and Lee's assertion that poets and visionaries tend to be "the great

[45] Robert D. Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 138.

[46] Muhammad Iqbal and KC Kanda, *Allama Iqbal: Selected Poetry* (Elgin, IL: New Dawn Press, 2006), 6-8.

[47] Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity,* 1.

champions of authenticity" offers another point of connection between his argument about Iqbal and the argument I make here about Dafora, who was also Muslim and searching for a way past the modernity-tradition dichotomy that continually influenced the reception of his work. By applying Lee's theory, and Iqbal's thought, I frame Dafora's work as Islamic, African, defiantly modern in its blend of western and African aesthetics, and emphatically political in its anti-colonial plot.

Kykunkor as an Expression of Pan-African Cultural Unity

The basic narrative of *Kykunkor* is a wedding meant to fortify the bonds between two distinct but neighboring peoples, the Mende and the Temne tribes. When read as a modern political expression and not merely an ethnological show or African pageant, *Kykunkor*'s wedding event can be seen as an anti-colonial and allegorical celebration of pan-cultural unity in the face of oppressive forces. The Mende and the Temne were the two dominant native groups in Sierra Leone during the early twentieth century.[48] The plot scenario explains that according to custom, a prince of the Temne tribe has come to the Mende maiden village to select his bride from among the potential women. The fact that the Temne prince even knows where the maiden village is, and that he arrives not only unhindered but celebrated, indicates that this ritual is likely a shared one of cultural contact between the tribes. The fact that the two most powerful tribal groups in Sierra Leone choose to intermarry also suggests a larger and possibly volatile political landscape to which this otherwise mundane event is contrasted. But the focus of Act One is the inter-cultural wedding itself, and all the scenes or segments in this first act support the importance of inter-cultural unification. This is emphasized in the major conflict that arises in Act One, which turns out to be an inter-cultural conflict.

[48] Aldridge, *A Transformed Colony,* 45-46.

After arriving to select his bride, a sequence of dances allows Prince Bokari, played by Dafora, to examine his options, choose a bride, show his acceptance, while also allowing the bride to express her satisfaction through dance. The conflict in this early part of the act is subtle in comparison to what is familiarly signaled in western drama. Plot movement from the beginning is shown to be dependent on the dancing. The successful performance of strength, beauty, worthiness, appreciation, and other values give each discreet dance its purpose in the musical (and, we assume, in actual tribal life in Sierra Leone among these two tribes). It is the act of dancing and the quality of the dancing that enables and drives forward the plot, and it is out of a moment of dance that "Bokari selects his bride from among them."[49] Bokari and his unnamed bride "dance the SUSU, or engagement dance,"[50] and at this late point in Act One there is no traditional, western development of an arc of conflict. Bokari calls on the hunters in his tribal party to prepare a wedding feast, and the lovers continue to express their pledge to each other through song and dance. The act of inter-cultural unity, which is embodied and performed literally in the engagement sequence, is the largest significant event so far.

The thematic conflict emerges when, "[as] they reach a passionate climax, they are interrupted by the return of the hunters with a wild cow for the feast."[51] The killing of a wild cow is a bad omen for the Mende tribe, and the bride and her people grow fearful and fall to the ground. This moment of cultural misunderstanding could easily signal the end of the proposed match. In terms of the plot of the musical it would certainly be reasonable if this error or affront to the gods of the bride's tribe was the cause of the trouble that soon engulfs the characters in *Kykunkor*, but this is not so. At no other point in the musical is the wild

[49] *Kykunkor* Playbill, June 18 (New York: Philip S. Birsh, 1934), 5.

[50] Ibid.

[51] *Kykunkor* Souvenir Program Book (undated), 6.

cow mentioned or referred to in the action. It is important to point out that this initial inter-cultural plot conflict in Act One is resolved within the act through performance, and as a result emphasizes what I will argue in the next section is *Kykunkor*'s more anti-colonial, allegorical meaning. The characters sing in order to placate the spirits, and having done so, continue with the celebration. Chief Burah, Bokari's father, arrives for the wedding and his presence occasions more songs and dances. Act One comes to a close much as it began, as an optimistic celebration of a union across these two distinct black cultures, despite the inevitable problems of translation or communication that such inter-cultural encounters will create.

Kykunkor as an Expression of Anti-Colonial Protest

Act Two of *Kykunkor* is structured around three contrasting stage events, wherein the notion of respect for the authentic sovereignty and freedom of the individual, and the larger cultural impact this respect for freedom can have, is given three different treatments. These contrasting events are the freeing of slaves at the start of the wedding, the act of possession that interrupts the wedding and serves as the climax of the musical's plot, and the danced exorcism performed by the witch doctor, which brings the second act and the musical's primary conflict to a close. When read together as political gestures, these moments emphasize that *Kykunkor* is a work of anti-colonial expression.

The act begins with the official start of the wedding ritual. The presence of Bokari's father, Chief Burah, calls for the presentation of gifts from the bride's tribe. Bokari sings about the tributes his father will receive when suddenly, “Bokari pleads to have *the slave girls, which are part of the traditional gift to the bridegroom's father*, freed, and the older women join in this song of pleading” [emphasis mine].[52] The choice to free the slave girls

[52] *Kykunkor* Playbill.

shows Bokari to be of a generous heart and perhaps socially progressive, since his concern for the freedom of the slave girls runs counter to the cultural understandings the two tribes traditionally share. Bokari perhaps understands that the fate of the slave girls may even be leverage for his own bride's happiness, since, as a maiden fresh out of her Bundu society, she may have been friend or sister to the girls being given as a bridal present. In any case, the act of voluntarily freeing a group of people who are legally controlled by others under the dominant rule of law takes on particular anti-colonial sentiment in light of Sierra Leone's oppression by the British and Dafora's own community activism in support of African liberation at large. But this resistant gesture made at the beginning of the wedding is further highlighted when the wedding is finally interrupted and fatally threatened by the appearance of the title character, the witch named Kykunkor. Bokari and the Bride begin to dance a consummation of their union in the form of a wedding dance. This dance-union is interrupted three times—first by Kykunkor's off-stage screams, then by her curses as she enters and confronts Bokari, and finally by the physical spell she dance-casts over Bokari.

It is intriguing that Kykunkor is not a villain due to any inherent quality of evil. Instead, we are told in the synopsis that she "has been sent to spoil the wedding by a jealous rival."[53] Essentially a laborer within her larger economic and social world, she has been compelled in some way we are never shown to do the bidding of an unseen figure in whose being the evil intent (the jealousy) of the act resides. It is also intriguing that the rival as a figure is shown to be unimportant to the action beyond its energy as a catalyst. The exact identity of this rival is never shared or investigated. The relationship of the rival to the wedding party is never clarified: Is it a jealous woman? Is it a spiteful male suitor? Has a neighboring chief attempted to undermine Chief Burah's future? This bitter rival is not even sought out and discovered by the community during the remainder of the musical. However, I argue that

[53] Ibid.

Dafora's lack of specificity about the catalyst of this communal tragedy of physical and spiritual imprisonment is intentional.

The unnamed-ness of the rival is useful here because it is a force that is unseen but whose presence through the workings of Kykunkor is tangible. The rival, and by extension Kykunkor, are elements that are understood by the characters onstage as being outside the celebrating community. Together they represent an uninvited intrusion on the rhythms and the lived spaces of black inter-cultural life. I suggest that when we read the witch woman Kykunkor as a representation of the forces of colonialism, or even as a symbolic embodiment of white Britain herself, the fact that she manages to threaten the entire community's future and paralyze it through the multi-leveled enslavement of Bokari suggests the much larger and real-life political conundrum in Africa. Through its presentation on Broadway, the image of an enslaving entity may also symbolize the outside forces (i.e. white America) paralyzing blacks in the U. S. as well.

Kykunkor as an Expression of Non-Western Spiritual Freedom

Another argument for a political reading of *Kykunkor* is the selective power of religion at work in the plot. When Bokari is stricken down to the stage floor under the power of Kykunkor's curse, the assembled community on stage attempts in three different ways to rescue the prince from the spell. First, the "entire wedding party is summoned and a song is again offered to the gods to invoke their aid […] and a dance is given."[54] This tactic fails. On their second try, the community brings in a Devil Dancer, whose medicinal dance also fails. Finally, "a Witch Doctor, as a last resort, is summoned."[55] This witch doctor happens to also be a Muslim, just as the actor who portrays him, Abdul Assen, is Muslim. Asadata Dafora,

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

too, is Muslim, according to the souvenir book.[56] While the Witch Doctor's practice appears to be syncretic, incorporating elements of "white magic," his presence on stage as an adherent to Islam, "pleading to Allah" for the life of Bokari, is significant. For many ticket-buyers, Assen's performance was one of the more memorable aspects of *Kykunkor. The New York Times* called Assen's work "one of the finest theatrical exhibitions anywhere to be seen,"[57] while the *Evening Sun* gushed that "Every actor in town ought to see Abdul Assen's impersonation of the witch doctor."[58]

The witch doctor scene is also notable for being what I assume is the first positive portrayal of a Muslim on a Broadway stage (and perhaps the first positive portrayal of a Muslim in American theater history), as well as possibly being the first American stage portrayal of an African whose Islamic practice is syncretic and multi-layered. By the 1930s, Islam had been an active part of African life in Sierra Leone for many ages. Dafora was raised in a mission school and yet professed his Islamic faith once he began presenting his dance and musical theater works in New York City. To play a cultural hero character who is subdued physically and spiritually, and whose imprisonment is unaffected by both superstitious remedies and indigenous religious practices, and to then be freed from that oppression by someone of Islamic faith makes an ideological statement. To be an actor who is also Muslim, to have the actor playing your liberator also be Muslim, and to have come to this staging of Islamic liberatory power from a largely Muslim community under British oppression also suggests possible political intention. Dafora may not have intentionally

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[56] "In the Cast," *Kykunkor* (souvenir program), Schomberg Center, 7.

[57] John Martin, "The Dance: A Revival: Kykunkor is Restored to its Original Form and Excellence, in *New York Times* (1923-Current file) [New York, NY] 13 Jan 1935 (New York, 1935), X8.

[58] W.J. Henderson, "Display ad 24 – no title. *New York Times* (1923-Current File) [New York, NY] Jun 19, 1934.

recruited or cast anyone on the basis of religion, but these political overtones or connections in his own work likely would not go unnoticed by him, and would probably not go unnoticed by any African nationals or American citizens who also happened to be Muslim and may have been in the audience of *Kykunkor*.

The defeat of Kykunkor is a scene where the affirmation of freedom, affirmed throughout the musical's action, is not extended to Kykunkor herself. Her defeat is also the scene where gender is most noticeably used to enhance the tension of the plot and the scene's sensational appeal. While other women are not denigrated in *Kykunkor*, the female slaves are freed, and the Bride is spared any malicious on-stage treatment, the witch woman herself suffers an oddly sexualized attack when she is finally subdued at the end of this second act. First, the Witch Doctor draws her evil spell out of Bokari's prone body and into a cow horn, which is part of his medical tool kit. Bokari bounds back to life, and the Witch Doctor, "to make sure that his cure will be permanent, summons the Witch Woman back by magic powers. Drawn into the scene again in spite of herself, she is still defiant."[59] In a reversal, it is now the witch woman's body that is physically no longer under her own control. Against her will and her final efforts, which include additional screams and spells, Kykunkor is finally brought to her knees. The Witch Doctor subdues Kykunkor as she had once subdued Bokari, and in a disturbing stage picture that suggests sexual aggression, the Witch Doctor stands over Kykunkor and "compels her to swallow, from the cow's horn, that very evil spirit she had caused to enter the body of the bridegroom, and she is completely overcome."[60]

The actions and story particulars of *Kykunkor* have political resonances in terms of class (the lives of royal figures as representative of the entire populace) and race (the larger anti-

[59] *Kykunkor* Playbill.

[60] Ibid.

colonial argument I am making). This raises the question of how gender plays into *Kykunkor*'s social critique. If Dafora is indeed personifying the evil of colonialism in the figure of a woman, then it seems that he is relying on problematic cultural notions of gender. However, it is not clear, lacking detailed statements from Dafora about his process, what he intended in this choice. It is not known, for example, whether or not Dafora's choice to make his villain a woman is based on a particular cultural tradition. Complicating a consideration of Dafora's gender-related choices is the way he positions the male dancing body as central to the plot and to the work—a gesture not common in the era's concert dances or Broadway musicals. It is through his dancing body that audiences see him express pride and confidence in himself and in his princely role as a cultural leader. It is through his dancing body that audiences watch Dafora stagger under the power of an evil spell, freeze and collapse in possession, and break free from the spell once it is purged by the witch doctor, who also dances his intervention. Dafora was well-versed in the traditional European stage practices of ballet and opera wherein the female ballerina's body is the conduit for the story. Bodies are not just aesthetic bodies but also social bodies that repeatedly perform expected social roles through which categories like gender are understood.[61] Dafora's choice to choreograph and dance a cultural story that positions his male body at the center and requires his performance of vulnerability as well as strength, suggests a gender politics that is at least

[61] Judith Butler, "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," in *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531. Butler theorizes gender identity, or its perception, as a sustained performance of and on the sexed, biological body. These performances are organized in part by social taboos and sanctions, and Butler argues that the construction of gender roles for the body to perform or "do" is a significant cultural project but one that is open to intervention through new performances. In the context of western concert dance history, Dafora's choreographic focus on his own male-sexed body's (momentary) control by a female-sexed body could be understood, in light of Butler, as a push against a gender norm, although the musical's affirmation of dominant gender norms in terms of the closing marriage scene suggests otherwise.

complex, though potentially conservative, in its approach to women.[62] Nevertheless, the suggestion of a sexualized and violent end to the witch Kykunkor's control and the provocative staging of that moment in the musical was understandably a sensational one to all who attended. If audience members understood the political ramifications possible in Dafora's performance of a black man enslaved by outside forces and freed by the non-Western strategies and performance practices of another black man, then they may have been too disturbed or overwhelmed to attend any further to those readings.

One of the most insightful and more recent interpretations of the exorcism moment in the musical, and of Asadata Dafora's work in general, is from Mark Franko (1997). Franko argues that Dafora, who was as thoroughly modern as Martha Graham or Jane Dudley and was a contemporaneous pioneer of new movement, used rhythm to intervene in the affect-emotion dichotomy of mid-thirties modern dance discourse which attended the reception of both Graham and Dudley's work.[63] It was through his rhythmic intervention that Dafora was able to express his Pan-Africanism through dance and enact a metakinetic transfer of feeling to his audience. White audiences experienced this metakinetic transfer but then interpreted

[62] Another provocative way to read the female witch in *Kykunkor* as a staged representation of an imperial power is to consider the image of the female witch in the work of James Weldon Johnson. Johnson is fond of the conceit of the white witch, and in his *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) the figure of the witch represents the city of New York, and suggests the dangers of urban life as well as the ideological traps waiting for black people interested in establishing their destinies and national identities. Although Johnson was in the generation before Dafora's, Johnson had a part-year appointment teaching at New York University during the years Dafora was presenting *Kykunkor* and his early works around the city, and it is entirely possible, given the cultural exchange that was Harlem at the time, that the two could have met or would likely have known of each other. There is no direct evidence linking Johnson's metaphoric use of the female witch as an influence on Dafora's making of *Kykunkor*, but the fact that both men circulated with many of the same black intellectuals and artists in Harlem raises the possibility that Dafora's conception of the female witch could have additionally been inspired by works like Johnson's, which renders the female witch as a nationalizing power or cultural gatekeeper.

[63]Mark Franko, "Nation, Class, and Ethnicities in Modern Dance of the 1930s," in *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 4 (1997): 475-91, 489.

and excused this deeply-felt response to *Kykunkor* as a result of the seductive spectacle of the possession scene. Franko effectively shows how the excessive focus by white critics on the emotional and sensual aspects of the witch Kykunkor's act of possession ultimately marks their confusion over it and explains their difficulty in understanding Dafora's distinct modernism.

I echo Franko's assertion that Dafora's dance work was ideological and enacted a metakinetic transfer or significant sense of feeling in his white and black audience members. However, Franko's analysis does not say much about race politics beyond an acknowledgment of Dafora's pan-Africanism. I would revise Franko's reading by saying that the ultimate point for Dafora in staging such a moment of (white) audience engagement was to encourage their participation in what was a total (physical and spiritual) black habitation of space. In terms of the plot of *Kykunkor*, I agree with Franko that the plot reaches its emotional height with the possession scene. However, in complicating Franko's reading further, I argue that it is freedom from possession, from being under the power of something other than one's own spiritual, physical, legal, and national volition, which surfaces as the political point and problem of the musical. *Kykunkor* gestures symbolically to the real threat of an all-black national space through the act of creating that all-black space of governance on the stage.

Black Nation

After the witch-woman's defeat at the end of Act Two and a long intermission, Act Three begins and ends in celebration of spiritual and physical freedom. The presence of the entire cast on stage for this act-length sequence of jubilant songs and dances also becomes an act of political and cultural freedom. The third act departs from the idea of a realist plot structure where various loose ends in the script are addressed and resolved. The pure revelry

and celebration are actually akin to the finales of many traditional western operas and ballets, where the main conflict has formally ended and the remaining time is filled with triumphant choruses and pageantry. However, if we hold on to a political reading we see that plot work is still going on in the third act.

Just as the choosing of the bride could not happen until there was a public performance of the brides beforehand, so, too, can there be no complete liberation until all members of the community perform this acknowledgment of freedom. The sequence of dances that end *Kykunkor* are of different types, giving everyone in the cast a chance to improvise and be acknowledged. The souvenir program book, for example, describes a challenge dance occurring, which would allow cast members to improvise in character. We are told that these improvising dancers are "finally joined by the old Chief, for the merriment has gotten too much for him. He completely forgets his dignity and vies with the younger men until he is out of breath."[64] The final stage moment is a festival dance, wherein many of the dancers form couples onstage. The inter-cultural unity sought from the beginning has been reached. That the tribes end happy and content in their tribal-ness might have signaled for some audience members an affirmation of blackness as seated comfortably outside of modernity, and as such would not have disturbed the prevailing discourse of primitive blackness. However, the show's performances of physical, social, and spiritual power in the story also supported the performance of artistic, economic, and political power by Dafora, his cast, and his constellation of supporters, who helped him move the show from its original storefront space to a Broadway theater house, where it would have a greater cultural impact.

Both *In Dahomey* and *Kykunkor* end with communal celebrations of identity and autonomy, made physical through the literal mobility of the songs and dances that allow the

[64] *Kykunkor* Souvenir Program Book, 6.

cast members to fill the sonic and visual space of the Broadway stage with their racially marked bodies and vocal presences. The notion that all-black ensembles could represent all-black free nations underscores a number of other connections between the two musicals through which we can read nationalist desires. In both musicals, the sense of the national is heralded on stage by three symbolic presences: a governmental presence, the presence of a figure associated with government who represents the emergent or future nation, and the presence of a gathered community representing the entire populace.

For *In Dahomey*, the procession of warrior-chiefs and citizens becomes a state parade with the entrance of the Cannibal King. Shylock and Rareback are transformed into emergent rulers, and the state parade they find themselves in is further metamorphosed into a literal celebration of black mobility with a series of dances and a cake-walk finale. For *Kykunkor*, the presence of Chief Burah formalizes the event as a governmental one. As heir to his father's rule, Prince Bokari represents the future of the Temne people, and his wedding's interruption by the witch Kykunkor is understood as a community crisis. Finally, *Kykunkor*'s royal wedding is an occasion for community gathering. Like the pairing off of couples during *In Dahomey*'s closing cakewalk dance, it affirms the continuance of the community.

The image and political resonance of a unified black community in celebration also supports a political reading of *Kykunkor* when we consider the title of the musical. The majority of events concern the inter-cultural unity that is represented in the communal wedding celebration. The witch Kykunkor is an outsider force that intrudes midway through the show and then is dispatched and not heard from again. While she is a catalyst for the action, Kykunkor the woman is not what the show is "about." Still, the musical bears her name and no one else's. When read as a story of liberation from the powers of oppression,

Kykunkor is about the lives of diverse Africanist communities once oppression and its effects have been named, subdued, and exorcised.

For Jesse A. Shipp, the members of the Williams and Walker company, and for Asadata Dafora, proof of the effectiveness of their uses of racist authenticity discourse and the significance of their visions of free, black modern nationhood can be evidenced in the actual financial success of their performances. In her early history of black Manhattan, Mary Ovington, describes the financial rise of Williams and Walker in San Francisco:

> Hardly more than boys, they secured employment at seven dollars a week. That was in 1889. In 1908 they made each $250 a week, and in later times they have doubled and quadrupled this.[65]

Their financial success enabled them to organize their large company and give employment to a number of other black performers, who in turn would use their new-found economic strength to produce other shows and hire other performers. Ideologically, Williams and Walker pioneered a use of conventions that would show subsequent generations of performers how to earn money in a racially oppressive career field while also pushing at the limits and nature of that oppression. Economically and artistically, the members of the Williams and Walker company helped create a literal black nation of stage performers by providing the next generation's training, exposure, and material opportunities.

Asadata Dafora's legacy is no less impressive. Dafora came to New York City and within a few years was able to create a performing company and career for himself as a musical theater artist and concert dancer who specialized in the adaptive use, preservation, and public circulation of traditional West African music and dance—the first successful person in modern American history to do so. This career was largely built on the popularity of his dance-centered musical *Kykunkor*, an event that also allowed Dafora additional achievements for himself and for black musical theater and concert dance artists who

[65] Ovington, *Half a Man,* 129-130.

followed. Within the international marketplace of performance, Dafora affirmed his own directorial and choreographic copyright and affirmed as well his mobility as a modern artist. With few exceptions, all marketing material for his shows identified Dafora as the primary creator and producer of his dance works.

The affirmation of the Africanness of his company members in *Kykunkor* was an extension of his own self-affirmation of authenticity. In terms of creative control over the work, these gestures affirmed the right of intimates (blacks) to control and manipulate the circulation of the knowledge embodied in their collectively staged dance and musical theater practices. Through the affirmation of himself and his company members as artists in control of their own representations of Africa, Dafora and his collaborators performed a self-governance and anti-colonial freedom that was in defiance of the imperialist control he was raised under and that still defined his home country's condition. Like the Williams and Walker company, Asadata Dafora also helped build a nation of black concert dance performers. With his economic resources he brought a number of African drummers and dancers to the United States and those artists went on to teach and shape the succeeding generation.[66] Dafora's strategic use of racial authenticity discourse may have played a part in the historical forgetting of his contributions, just as later generations also forgot the Williams and Walker company because of the unpleasant associations racial authenticity generates for many people. Nevertheless, his strategy also established him as a modern dance pioneer and provided him a degree of creative autonomy and financial power that were distinguished

[66] Dizzy Gillespie, *To Be, Or Not—to Bop* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 290; Babatunde Olatunji and Akinsola A. Akiwowo, *The beat of my drum: An autobiography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 9. In their autobiographies, jazz and world music legends Dizzy Gillespie and Babatunde Olatunji both discuss Dafora's specific influence in their lives.

achievements for any artist during the Depression, especially for a black man in Harlem who was also an African immigrant.

Conclusion

Henry D. Miller argues that black dramatic theory throughout the twentieth century was characterized by an art-versus-propaganda debate.[67] This divide between the assumed two purposes for black public creative expression was first explored subtly through the public performances of Bob Cole, Will Marion Cook, and their generation of collaborators (including the other members of the Williams and Walker company).[68] Shortly after, this divide was addressed explicitly in the philosophical writings and stage creations of W.E.B. Du Bois and interrogated further through the writings of Alain Locke. For Miller, Du Bois and Locke remain the most significant creators of black dramatic theory in the twentieth century, and he argues effectively how even the most recent debates on black drama, such as the notorious August Wilson-Robert Brustein battle, are returns to the kinds of debates that Cole, Cook, Du Bois, and Locke initiated in the early decades of the twentieth century.[69]

The Dubois/Locke and Wilson/Brustein debates constitute an ongoing argument on the way racial authenticity discourse impedes black modernities. Miller asserts that in discussions of black drama by critics and artists who are both black and non-black, there is a continuing insistence on neatly framing the problem of black representation as a problem of this century-long, binary division between art and propaganda. He points out that Du Bois and Locke are themselves products of the same binary thinking that produced a distinction between white modernity and non-white primitive authenticity, which in turn shaped their

[67] Henry D. Miller, *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 3-10.

[68] Ibid., 21.

[69] Ibid., 14.

own critical responses.[70] Miller understands that not all black artists have personally accepted this binary tension as the defining feature of their work, but argues that the historical fact of this binary's emphasis is nonetheless central to any understanding or misunderstanding of modern black drama, and must be engaged if real critical assessments of black drama are to be made.[71] Du Bois, Locke, and Miller's efforts all emphasize the centrality of authenticity. Miller understands that the debate over how black drama should function, and to what end, is a debate about intervening in the dominant, imperial, and racist discourse of (black) authenticity.

By extension, I argue that this binary tension of art-versus-propaganda, familiar as an operating principle in black-created drama and its assessments, can also be more effectively understood in relation to black *musical* theater if considered alongside the discourse of racial authenticity. Because a racist and binary discourse of authenticity preceded the acknowledgment of Du Bois's existential black anxiety, a return to a critical assessment of this discourse allows us to see how problems of racial authenticity persist in black musical theater today, despite the conscious decision of the creators and critics of these shows to move beyond what is (from their perspective) a Du Boisian legacy of explanatory but narrowly defined and outdated aesthetic politics of black theater. By offering critiques of the discourse of racial authenticity, the creators of *In Dahomey* and *Kykunkor* express some of the problems of this received chain of binaries defining black musical theater. Through acts of resistant, "authentic" performance, they hint at possible ways out of the racialized, discursive circle drawn around them and their work as artists.

As the century progressed, concerns about black-created authenticity and how that notion would help or hinder the progress of blacks living in America continued to shift.

[70] Ibid., 36.

[71] Ibid., 228.

Tensions increased worldwide over issues of national belonging and the right different peoples had to the shared spaces of the world's cities where much of that sense of belonging was being forged. As the sites and everyday performances of black racial difference changed, for example, through the desegregation of workplaces and changes in the legal practices of citizenship, the prevailing discourse of black racial difference also changed. Against the prevailing discourse of racialized citizenship in the second half of the twentieth century, *Lost in the Stars* (1949) and *Sarafina!* (1988) were staged as new visions of citizenship for their Broadway audiences.

Chapter Two – Africa as a Redefinition of Racialized Citizenship: *Lost in the Stars* (1949) and *Sarafina!* (1988)

When Act Two, Scene Seven of *Lost in the Stars* begins, the audience has already witnessed the arc of the musical's tragic action. As in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the futures of the opposing groups in the village of Ndotsheni are at risk because of the loss of their young adults. It is at this highest moment of tragic emotion that book writer-lyricist Maxwell Anderson and composer Kurt Weill introduce a scene of comic relief. Curiously, this moment of relief is a moment of inter-racial intimacy with an indirect celebration of the mobility of urban black citizenship at its center. The scene begins with a black city boy named Alex who entertains two black village children with his comedic song, "Big Mole." They are joined on stage near the end of this song by the young, white, inquisitive Edward, who happens upon their playful scene. The two black village children are observant of the village of Ndotsheni's strict code of racial segregation, so Edward's arrival sends them running away—a hint of the kind of forced mobility and colonization of lived space[1] that black South Africans face under apartheid. However, Alex remains onstage with Edward, and the two similarly aged boys proceed to question each other and joke with each other in a manner the adults in the musical have been unable and unwilling to practice. They consciously enter a confidence with each other that has been criminalized by their government, and through this physical act of resistance through engagement they end the scene as friends. Alex and Edward enact the kind of response to worldwide racial violence that Anderson and Weill hoped for, and demonstrate the sense of equal citizenship that is

[1] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK:Wiley-Blackwell, 1992). My understanding of the social dimension of space, and the way capitalism and state power are reflexively constructed with and through space, comes from Lefebvre, who has theorized the way ideology is embedded in representations of space and in everyday spatial practices.

affirmed at the end of *Lost in the Stars* in the eventual reconciliation of the main protagonists Stephen Kumalo and James Jarvis.

Most critics who have written about *Lost in the Stars* point to the final reconciliation between Stephen and the elder Jarvis as its key moment and its enduring anti-racist gesture of hope. I imagine this is because *Lost in the Stars* is a mostly faithful stage adaptation, and the final moment of forgiveness is what forms the plot resolution for Alan Paton's source novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. However, what Anderson and Weill actually achieve in *Lost in the Stars* is an anti-racist musical in which the ideological center is a comic, equalizing moment of inter-racial interaction between a white child (Edward) and a black child (Alex).

In this chapter I argue that the apartheid South Africa in Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars,* and in Mbogeni Ngema's *Sarafina!* forty years later, are both critiqued through the song and dance of urban black children, whose performances express a counterhegemonic vision of citizenship. They sing and dance a rejection of the prevailing notion of the citizen in their eras, redefining the role in social space, if only for the duration of their songs. In doing so, they highlight the imaginative political work of Africa-focused Broadway musicals. Like many Africa-focused Broadway musicals, *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!* were created to effect change in the public's thinking around race and citizenship. The creators of both musicals do this through their representations of black urban youth in order to challenge assumptions about that group's supposed criminal threat to civic peace. Both musicals practice a redefinition of the prevailing racist notion of national citizenship. They also share important contextual and political affinities. Despite their aesthetic differences and particular ideological contradictions, I argue that *Sarafina!* should be read critically with and against *Lost in the Stars* in order to better understand the prevailing

discourse of racist citizenship, which operated in most Africa-focused Broadway musicals (and I would add, in most Broadway musicals generally) during the second half of the twentieth century.

In being brought closer to each other through the imaginative and physical act of performance, the inter-racial performers and audience members of *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!* practice a mode of equal citizenship not easily available to them once they leave the theater. Holston and Appadurai argue that the survival of national citizenship as a value depends upon "performances of citizenship" in order for citizens to imagine their similarity or shared purpose.[2] If this is true, then the shared but dangerous inter-racial encounters that *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!* invite their Broadway audiences into serve as important artistic and under-theorized examples of such enactments of citizenship's value.

With *Lost in the Stars*, Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill (along with their other collaborators, including director Rouben Mamoulian) stage a redefinition of the prevailing, racist conception of the good citizen. They achieve this through their portrayal of the urban black youth as a good citizen, represented by the character Alex and the single song and scene in *Lost in the Stars* in which his character is fully explored on stage. As an urban black youth, Alex can become the representative of good citizenship once he has been rehabilitated from all associations with the criminal space of the city through his orientation to conservative, rural-based, domestic values.

The centrality of the city of Johannesburg to both the book and the musical's plot would initially suggest (as Holston and Appadurai argue) that the city is necessary for the formation of good citizenship, yet *Lost in the Stars* reveals the city to be the enemy of the good citizen —a corrupting force and space that only a return to the rural home can effectively combat.

[2] James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, "Cities and Citizenship" in *Public Culture* (University of Chicago, 1996), 8:187-204, 192.

The negativity of Absalom's portrayal as a corrupted city youth and the sense of tragic loss in Act One is countered in Act Two by the portrayal of Alex, whose appearance with "Big Mole" not only offers a moment of uplift in the plot but points to a future of racial equality and full citizenship. It is this vision of racial equality and a "universal," full citizenship that the larger scene between Alex and Edward is meant to represent.

With *Sarafina!,* Mbongeni Ngema presents the problem of racist citizenship not as the individual denial of shared domestic purpose, but as the communal support of white supremacist systems. In his redefinition, the good citizen emerges as the one who participates fully in the project of anti-racist action against the white supremacy project of apartheid, regardless of one's racial identity or affiliation. He achieves this redefinition through two significant theatrical choices. Ngema's first significant theatrical choice is to use the ensemble to invoke the rhythms, content, and citizenship practices of school, and then to critique what is taught within that space about black South African history and national citizenship. *Sarafina!* begins with the entrance of the on-stage band, followed by the ensemble of students. Together the two groups perform a series of simple and joyous songs, using the sound of *mbaqanga* to establish the opening tone and to help narrate the events of the musical. Mbaqanga, also called "African Jive" and pronounced "mm-bah-KAHN-gah," is an uplifting, rhythmic, danceable form of black township jazz music most popular in South Africa from the 1950s through the 1970s . Like punk, hip-hop, and reggae, mbaqanga is music created under conditions of social and economic oppression and is understood by its fans and musicians as a music of rebellion: "This is music that rolls along on its fat, bubbling bass lines and metallically chiming guitar riffs. It's essentially covert marching music with added soul."[3] The overall effect of this energetic beginning, supported by the

[3] Howard Male, "The South African Sound of Mbaqanga," *theartsdesk.com,* March 02, 2010, http://www.theartsdesk.com/new-music/south-african-sound-mbaqanga (accessed May 24, 2013).

musical's mbaqanga score, is to suggest the simple joy of school and the mischievous fun of the school playground. If the traditional view of racist citizenship assumes that urban black youth are the source of trouble and social decay, the first act of *Sarafina!* and its history class scenes shatter that view through the ensemble's charm, energetic performance, and attention to the process of learning.

Ngema's second significant theatrical choice in *Sarafina!* is his playful use of ensemble role switching and direct address to suggest that through theatrical participation and the act of listening itself—of being a member of the Broadway audience—we participate in a political act of witness. This choice is most visible in his use of the Victoria Mxenge story and in the musical's closing concert, featuring the character Sarafina's transformation into Nelson Mandela. Ngema's political argument in Act Two is also a Zulu cultural argument and a personal, transnational, and aesthetic one. This complexity is arguably why many critics misunderstand or under-appreciate the show.

This chapter looks at the semiotic work and cultural significance of two Africa-focused Broadway musicals performed in the second half of the twentieth century that are set in the country of South Africa and treat within their plots the situation of apartheid. My observations about the shows are based on the following primary and additional sources: the published play scripts of both musicals and the original Broadway playbill for *Lost in the Stars*; the official cast recording of the shows' original productions; newspaper reviews of the shows; production photos of *Lost in the Stars* by W. Eugene Smith—some of which were published in a 1949 *Time* magazine feature article; video viewings of the original Cort Theatre production of *Sarafina!* (1988) and viewings of the recent re-staging of *Lost in the Stars* through the ENCORES production series, both screened at the Lincoln Center archives; video viewings of documentaries on Maxwell Anderson and on the making of

Sarafina!; DVD viewings of the film adaptations of *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!*; and biographies, critical monographs and other essays published in English about Paton, Anderson, Weill, and Ngema.

Despite the fact that there is a thirty-eight-year separation between the shows, I have arranged my discussion on Africa-focused musicals and citizenship in this chapter around these two shows because of the importance of the shows in relation to their historical contexts, and the significant affinities found in their citizenship statements.

Theorizing Musical Theater Performance as Citizenship Practice

Both *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!* have long been under-appreciated in theater historiography. These shows, transnational in origin and created as vehicles for global anti-racist activism, have each conceptualized citizenship in ways that are illuminated by the work of contemporary theorists like James Holston, Arjun Appadurai, and Micheal Eigtved —scholars who are writing across disciplines about the social-political experience of the City and the way that experience works in new formations of citizenship. Holston and Appadurai's essay "Cities and Citizenship" and Michael Eigtved's work on popular musical theater as a strategic tool for city life offer a number of important and complimentary observations about the building and re-defining of national citizenship.[4] Their work, alongside a consideration of the politics of mobility and the way urban black identity has been criminalized in discussions of citizenship, reveals *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!* as cultural texts important to the shifting ideas around racialized citizenship.

Holston and Appadurai remind us that modern citizenship since the eighteenth century is mobile, conflicted, and subject to tremendous change due to globalization, industrialization,

[4] Holston and Appadurai, "Cities and Citizenship," 196; Eigtved, "The Musical (Theater) as Equipment...", 361-362.

identity politics, and transnational practices.[5] The once-dominant meaning of citizenship as a shared sense of civilization, which formed the basis of national belonging and was central to the liberal compact that T.H. Marshall espoused, is no longer convincing. According to Holston and Appadurai, national citizenship is not a unified practice with a unified meaning. I follow them in defining "citizenship" here as an imagined relationship between the individual and the polity comprising various kinds of formal (officially recognized and legally protected) citizenship practices as well as "substantive" (lived, everyday experiential) citizenship practices. These practices must be performed in order to sustain our investment in them. However, the disjunction "between the form and substance of citizenship" fuels new citizenship practices while eroding the former centrality of the nation-state and its failed promises within our social understanding of citizenship.[6] While the city is not always central to the practices of *national* citizenship, Holston and Appadurai argue that the city remains important to our reconsideration of citizenship in general.

Holston and Appadurai's notion of the city as a site for the lived practice of citizenship formation, contestation, and change is affirmed in Eigtved's assertion of the city as a space generated by and generative of performance. Eigtved argues that the popular musical theater —and under that umbrella he includes works created for Broadway and London's West End —not only reflects life in the city through its form and content. Musical theater also offers historically specific strategies for dealing with "the difficulties raised in living inside the big city," which Holston and Appadurai refer to as the "tumult of citizenship."[7] For example, Eigtved points out that a central element in the musical as a genre is its continuous parade of

[5] Holston and Appadurai, "Cities and Citizenship,"196-200.

[6] Ibid., 190.

[7] Eigtved, "The Musical (Theater) as Equipment for Living," 353; Holston and Appadurai, "Cities and Citizenship," 188.

changing features—an aspect that characterized life in the industrial and immigrant-swollen cities.[8] Eigtved ultimately suggests that a consideration of the musical as a tool for city living would be useful, while Holston and Appadurai plead for more attention to the lived practice of citizenship in the city as a way to address the gaps in theorizations of the building of citizenship.

Both these theoretical aims are furthered through an examination of the Africa-focused Broadway musicals *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!*. Musicals, as reflections of the city, are representations of the lived practice of citizenship, and as "equipment for living" help to shape actual lived practice, as Eigtved argues. *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!*, as musicals about racial conflict within the city, both highlight the racialized and white-supremacist, classed, and gendered nature of citizenship as it was practiced through much of the twentieth century in the United States and South Africa, and emphasizes as well the centrality of cities in the racialized contest over national belonging.

In addition to the formation of contemporary forms of citizenship, the concept of mobility is also an important critical concern here. Mobility is useful in conceptualizing new forms of citizenship and in understanding resistant forms of citizenship practice. Resistant citizenship practices tend to be expressed in many musical theater works in general and is often expressed in Africa-focused Broadway musicals in particular. Musicals stage the human body in motion. The mobility of the body—by which I mean the way a character's shift from "real," everyday expression to the heightened expression and expansive movement of the song-and-dance moment—is an essential part of its utopian attraction to an audience.[9] Yet for social geographers Luke Desforges, Rhys Jones, and Mike Woods who

[8] Eigtved, "The Musical (Theater) as Equipment for Living," 353.

[9] Richard Dyer, *Only entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Dyer's chapter "Entertainment and Utopia" explains the utopian experience of musical theater as an important function of the genre as a popular entertainment.

theorize about citizenship, “It is the disruptive potential of mobility that connects it to citizenship. Traditionally, citizenship has functioned as a means by which the state has sought to control mobilities.”[10] Desforges, et al. remind us that significant problems arise when this ordering process is transgressed by the mobility of those deemed to be non-citizens, or when a citizen's “mobility conflicts with the expectations of the national citizen.”[11] Therefore, the creative potential of mobility to disrupt or rework notions of citizenship is tied here to performance, and then to the performance strategies of the state-defined “illegal” body, which brings us to the notion of these shows' radical citizenship practices through its urban black performing bodies.

In 1948 the newly-elected government in South Africa announced their apartheid policy, and as part of that social rearrangement banned all blacks from military training. That same year, President Truman banned racial segregation in the U.S. military, which began a gradual but ultimately successful extension of workplace citizenship rights to all Americans in terms of race. The Broadway debut of *Lost in the Stars* in the following year marked its arrival in popular culture as a work of transnational origin at a time when the United States and South Africa were making public but divergent decisions about how race-based citizenship would be defined. These public decisions, in turn, determined the legal citizenship practices black bodies could perform within everyday life and within aesthetic, entertainment frameworks. In South Africa, for example, The Immorality Amendment Act (1950) banned sexual relations between whites and blacks. This attempt to control even the intimacy of bodies no doubt informed other legislation against bodies in similarly intimate or personal interracial

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[10] Luke Desforges, R. J., & Mike Woods, "New Geographies of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies* 9(5): 439-451 (2005), 442.

[11] Ibid.

situations, such as the outlawing of multiracial performance companies in South Africa in 1964.[12]

Mobility, black criminality, and the tensions between rural and urban spaces are important themes in *Lost in the Stars.* While the show is significantly different from South African writer Alan Paton's source novel in tone and in its aesthetic elements, it remains recognizably faithful in terms of plot action. Paton's widely published *Cry, the Beloved Country* tells the story of Stephen Kumalo, a Zulu Anglican priest from Ndotsheni—a village in a poor and rural province of South Africa. Stephen leaves his wife Grace and their nurturing community to travel far away to the bustling and dangerous city of Johannesburg on a double mission: to bring back his wayward sister and to discover what has happened to his missing adult son, Absalom. Prior to the start of the story the boy had moved to the city to earn money in the mines for his education, and when the story commences Absalom has not returned or even written in almost a year. Unknown to Stephen, Absalom is so concerned with his own economic mobility and desire for fuller citizenship (which he feels that only more money could provide) that he decides to join a robbery plot in order to secure that greater movement. In Absalom the idea of mobility and the urban black criminal are emphatically established.

The house he and his crew of disenfranchised black men plot to rob is the home of Arthur Jarvis, a wealthy young white man originally from Absalom and Stephen's hometown of Ndotsheni. Arthur is living in Johannesburg and has been working actively for political and legal reforms in support of South Africa's black population. In a moment of bitter irony, the young black criminals break into Arthur's house and in the tumult of that encounter, end up killing him. The men are arrested soon after, and in this way Stephen's search leads him

[12] See Coplan, 269-270.

first to the bitter discovery of his son's involvement in such a horrendous crime, and then to his conflict with Arthur's grieving father, James Jarvis. The elder Jarvis is a wealthy farmer in Ndotsheni, and although they have lived for years as virtual neighbors, it has taken the mobility of travel and a tragic criminal act in the city to force the two pastoral men into a conversation.

Initially this conversation does not go well. Absalom is put on trial and Stephen asks Jarvis, since he is a white man of wealth and influence, for his help and forgiveness for Absalom. The older Jarvis refuses and wants only what the court ultimately decides on, which is the state execution of Absalom as a criminal. Alongside this central action, Stephen manages to find his sister Gertrude and the son she has had out of wedlock. Stephen returns to his village having both gained and lost family members in the process.[13] The final moment of the story is between Stephen and Jarvis on the morning of Absalom's execution. Jarvis has softened enough to recognize that his terrible loss was truly and equally shared by Stephen, and the two men end the story in both the novel and stage musical adaptation by establishing a tenuous but hopeful peace between one another.

The core story of *Cry, The Beloved Country* and *Lost in the Stars* sends the message that without a sense of shared purpose and compassion, the racial violence which can destroy communities will only beget other acts of racial violence. In this way the deeper "criminal" of the story is the injustice of the racially divided social system of South Africa itself (and its sibling reflection in the segregated United States). However, the presence of an urban black youth as the sole criminal in both versions of the story troubles any claims made about the

[13] In the source novel, Gertrude returns to Ndotsheni and is an active character in the book. In the musical stage adaptation, the audience is never shown Gertrude but is only told about her, and she refuses to return with Stephen though she has no problem letting Stephen take her son back to their rural home. The physical absence of Gertrude as a character in the musical version is one of a handful of significant alterations to the source novel, though the basic central plot remains unchanged.

anti-racist nature of the story since it preserves the long-standing image of the black urban youth as a criminal presence in peaceful society. Furthermore, Anderson and Weill's telling of the story places the space of the rural and the space of the city in a moralistic, binary opposition. The musical suggests that the crisis experienced by the main characters could not have happened on some level without the temptations and chaotic social values of the city. By the end of the twentieth century, the tendency to criminalize urban black presence and its expressions, and to characterize the physical space of the city itself as a breeding ground of immorality, had moved from the cultural margins to the center of public consciousness.

The arrival of Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina!* to Off-Broadway acclaim in New York City, and then to its short but acclaimed Broadway run, coincided with the nation's growing concern over the mobility urban racial violence and its resistance to containment and control. By the late 1980s images of urban and predominately black youth, depicting them as both purveyors and victims of violence, had proliferated substantially over preceding years in terms of their presence in popular culture.[14] These images became literally ubiquitous in pop culture by the middle of the 1990s, alongside increased legislation which criminalized urban black youth presence or expressions, or both. It is amid these largely serious and public debates on the real or imagined threats of urban blackness that *Sarafina!* made its debut.

[14] A number of milestones in pop culture illuminate this development. The infamous Bernhard Goetz case, in which a white New Yorker on a train shot four young blacks who allegedly were attempting to mug him, occurred in 1984 and led to a nation-wide debate about urban black violence and gun-control. In 1986 the musical song genre known as "gangsta rap" began with groundbreaking albums by Ice-T and the group The Beastie Boys, among others. In 1988 the controversial gangsta rap group N.W.A. had the first blockbuster rap album in terms of sales, and rap became the bestselling music genre in the United States for the first time. By the 1990s, visual images of criminalized urban black space and its victim-heroes were circulating far beyond hip-hop culture's fans in films like *New Jack City* (1991) and *Boyz 'N The Hood* (1991)—a film nominated for several Academy Awards.

At its most basic level, the plot of *Sarafina!* concerns students at Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto, South Africa in 1976, and their attempts to attend school and perform a musical concert amid increasing government oppression and resistance in their city and nation. Through set, costumes, and ensemble action Ngema re-creates the sights and sounds of a Soweto school, but one of the accomplishments of *Sarafina!* is the way Ngema uses the rituals of school, particularly the history class, to critique society's definition and practice of citizenship. While most of the action and music of Act One highlight the various joys of black South African life and the challenges of this life under apartheid, in Act Two the ensemble becomes increasingly politicized and involved in the growing freedom movement.

Ngema's other significant accomplishment in *Sarafina!* is his use of the ensemble to blur traditional theatrical boundaries. By the time the children of *Sarafina!* discuss putting on a show in Act Two, they have so blurred the boundaries between past and present, fact and fiction that the youth concert in what was originally the African past becomes indistinguishable from the youth concert in what is the Broadway-New York City present. In *Sarafina!* Ngema engages the Broadway audience's participation in a critical performance of citizenship. Before returning to each musical's particular achievements in re-defining racist citizenship, I will briefly review the biographies of Maxwell Anderson, Kurt Weill, and Mbongeni Ngema in this next section, in order to show how their personal stories serve as meditations on citizenship from which these Africa-focused Broadway musicals were created.[15]

[15] *Lost in the Stars* director Rouben Mamoulian is already firmly established in history as a film director. His legacy as a stage director is the subject of an increasing number of new studies but is not explored here since the focus is primarily on Anderson and Weill's work, which survives beyond any particular staging. Also intentionally not considered is the biography and work of Hugh Masekela, who contributed some (but not all) of the music for *Sarafina!* and who is most known for his important contributions to jazz and the world music industry. My focus on the primary writers of these Africa-focused shows is ultimately an effort to trace the conceptual origins of the shows, understanding that these shows owe their full social power to a complex meeting of collaborative energies that include a large

Anderson, Weill, and Ngema: The Ironies of the Independent Citizen

A consideration of the life experiences and artistic works of Maxwell Anderson, Kurt Weill, and Mbongeni Ngema reveal the three men to be artists who responded profoundly to their own internal compasses throughout their careers. They did so in creative tension with the values and desires of the communities engaged by their work. Their fiercely independent natures, along with their particular historical circumstances and cultural upbringings, shaped the representations of Africa, citizenship, and criminal proximity in the musicals discussed in this chapter.

The seven major English-language, full-length studies of Kurt Weill currently in print[16] all make the case for Weill as a tireless experimenter with musical form and attempt to posit a coherent story about why Weill's work has not been understood in its diversity. For some critics, Weill's work in popular American musical theater form complicates rather than aids an understanding of him as a serious composer. But I would argue that the importance that transnational mobility and racial intolerance played in Weill's life, along with his interest in popular expression, make Weill's work in *Lost in the Stars* perfectly legible within a life and upbringing marked by a spirit of transgression.

Kurt Weill was born in Dessau, Germany in 1900, a city which for many years had been a center of moderate Reformist activity within German Judaism.[17] He studied music at a conservatory in Berlin, left to work as a coach at an opera company, then returned to study music under Busoni in Berlin, where he became an opera composer. The rebellious heritage

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assembly of artistic creators, backstage laborers, critics, and audience members.

[16] Sanders, 1980; Kowalke, 1986; Drew, 1987; Taylor, 1997; Schebera, 1995; Hirsch, 2002; and Hinton, 2012.

[17] Ronald Sanders, *The Days Grow Short: The Life and Music of Kurt Weill,* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 8.

of his hometown eventually surfaced in Weill's personal and artistic life. He met a young actress and dancer, Lotte Lenya, and married her in 1926. She was not Jewish and Weill's parents did not approve the match, so they demonstrated this extreme disapproval of Weill's cultural rebelliousness by not attending his wedding. Weill's rebelliousness found a kindred spirit in both Lenya and playwright-director Bertolt Brecht, whom he met soon after and began what is one of the more famous collaborative relationships in the arts.

Brecht and Weill met just at the moment that each artist was beginning to develop and work through their unique ideas about words and music for the stage.[18] Brecht was exploring his "epic theatre" and Kurt Weill, who was establishing a name for himself as a well-regarded composer of "pure" or "absolute" classical music compositions, was growing more interested in music theater and song form. Weill turned increasingly to popular and folk music of all kinds for inspiration, becoming a fan of the Gershwin brothers and of African American jazz in particular. Brecht and Weill's boundary-pushing collaborations satisfied the rebellious part of Weill temporarily, but eventually Brecht's domineering personality led to the end of their collaboration.[19] In addition, political pressures and the increasing anti-Semitic climate in Germany forced Weill and Lenya to leave. By the time he met and befriended Maxwell Anderson in the mid-1930s, Weill had moved to New York and rejected the racism of his homeland. By 1943, he was sworn in as an American citizen, and although Weill had no public commitment to social justice for African Americans in particular, he was committed to using his art to foster the same universal, liberal sense of citizenship that was espoused by T.H. Marshall in that era—an idealized vision of citizenship also embraced by his latest collaborator, Maxwell Anderson. In the life story of Kurt Weill, then, we can see

[18] Ibid., 81.

[19] Most notably, *Die Dreigroschenoper* ("The Threepenny Opera,"1928).

how mobility was tied to his sense of freedom, and how this sense of freedom especially accounted for his transnational movements.

Maxwell Anderson has not fared as kindly with theater historians, in part due to the infrequent scholarship done on him; however all of the four, full-length texts currently available on Anderson reveal him to be an idealist and individualist.[20] Maxwell Anderson was born in 1888 in the town of Atlantic, Pennsylvania to a Christian family. He graduated from the University of North Dakota in 1911 and married Margaret, an atheist and the first of his three wives, that same year. Like Weill, Anderson had married outside of the religious tradition of his upbringing, and the ensuing fight with his domineering father over the issue led Anderson to dis-invite his entire side of the family from the wedding. After teaching for five years Anderson went to work at various newspapers, but his journalism career came to an end in California, when he lost at least one job for his liberal views. The young Anderson was a radical liberal who preached pacifism at a time when most Americans supported the war effort.

After his journalism career ended Anderson began to write plays, and this new life as a professional playwright was secured for him through a series of instantly successful plays in the 1920s and 1930s, including his political play *Both Your Houses* (1933), which won a Pulitzer Prize. Bailey describes Anderson as a moralistic writer who saw all art as the embodiment of themes, and who regarded the expression of theme as the prime purpose of art.[21] As he aged, Anderson grew more patriotic and conservative, and in the end his politics

[20] These four full-length works are by Clark (1933), Bailey (1957), Avery (1977), and Shivers (1983). Of these four, only the most recent two are actual biographies. All these texts offer some degree of critical commentary on his plays, though the Shivers book is the most complete.

[21] M.D. Bailey, *Maxwell Anderson: The Playwright as Prophet,* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1957).

were largely concerned with aesthetics and restoring poetic verse drama in English back to prominence. By this time in the mid-century Eugene O'Neill had helped usher in the new and popular age of dramatic realism in American theater. Anderson's passionate commitment to verse drama, which only experienced a brief revival in popular taste, has isolated him ever since in theater history but marks him nonetheless as an artist dedicated to pursuing his own vision.

As a fellow individualist who was also obsessively committed to his art, Anderson found deep affinities with Kurt Weill and the two became best friends. Their wives became friends with one another, and they bought property near each other in the progressive little town of New City. They talked often about collaborating, and finally did with the successful Broadway musical fantasy *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1936). Anderson and Weill hoped to repeat that success with another collaboration, but they needed the right theme. Anderson searched for the next few years in vain for a theme that could address the black-white racial divide in his nation and that could also once again attract his ideal collaborator, Kurt Weill.[22]

Finally, in 1947 Anderson was on the return leg of a European cruise, heading back to New York City. Also on the cruise was Mrs. Dorothy Hammerstein, wife of musical theater pioneer Oscar Hammerstein II, who insisted that Anderson consider a soon-to-be published novel by her friend Alan Paton.[23] Paton was a white South African who began his career as a teacher and then as principal of the largest juvenile prison in South Africa and the only juvenile prison designed specifically for Africans, the Diepkloof Reformatory for African Boys. Paton was deeply religious and interested in the moral uplift of his charges, but the

[22] Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill's search for a black source story is told in detail in Robert J. Rabel's essay, "Odysseus almost makes it to Broadway" (2007) and in Ronald Taylor's biography, *Kurt Weill: Composer in a Divided World* (1991).

[23] Alfred S. Shivers, P. D., *The Life of Maxwell Anderson*. (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), 227.

work at the prison was exhausting and eventually led him to take a break from this job to conduct a tour of penal institutions in other countries. It was during this multi-country tour that Paton wrote his first and most famous novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). Paton saw the book as a cry for peace and justice amid the racialized horrors of his homeland. Through his friends Paton found a publisher in America soon after he completed the book. The novel became an immediate bestseller, eventually attracting the attention of the Hammersteins.

While it is significant to notice that the source novel's rise in popular and world literary culture was aided by some of musical theater's most powerful people (Dorothy and Oscar Hammerstein II), it is even more significant that this novel of racial harmony was written by a former principal of a prison for young black Africans. The issues of full citizenship, criminal black youth, and mobility are woven into the fabric of Paton's life and thus by extension into the novel and the stage musical adaptation. However, it was the novel's thematic plea for a return to "universal" values in the midst of racial division that excited Anderson, who listened to the synopsis and then suggested the book to Weill as their next project once he returned home. The team was provided a copy of the novel, and after reading it Anderson wrote a letter to Paton asking, and ultimately getting, Paton's permission to adapt *Cry, the Beloved Country* into a stage musical. Forty years later, the origins of *Sarafina!* and the life of Ngema also involved trans-Atlantic travel, an engagement with systems of criminal justice, a spirit of independence, and a determination to respond to the social oppression of black people.

Sarafina! was written and directed by black South African Zulu actor and musician Mbongeni Ngema, with music co-composed by Ngema and internationally-known jazz artist (and fellow South African) Hugh Masekela, who wrote his portion of the music while in

exile. Ngema was born in the Natal province in 1955 to a respected Zulu family. Both his father and grandfather served in the British-run police force, suggesting that issues of criminality and justice run deep for him. Much of what is known about Ngema comes from his biography by Laura Jones, *Nothing Except Ourselves: The Harsh Times and Bold Theater of South Africa's Mbongeni Ngema* (1994) and from an insightful critical essay by Roberta Uno, "Mbongeni Ngema: A Theater of the Ancestors," published in the journal *Theatre Topics* in the same year but prior to the appearance of Jones' book.

Uno's essay offers a supportive critical framework for understanding Ngema's drama and highlights a few key areas that persist in his plays and are discernible in *Sarafina!*: Ngema's unique blend of Grotowski principles, his Gibson Kente training, and an "African sense of ensemble";[24] his use of music to synthesize elements of the show and provide its structure;[25] his evocation of the ancestors, in keeping with Zulu tradition;[26] and his bold, township-style politics.[27] I draw here on Uno's emphasis of the importance of an African sense of ensemble, in which "the ensemble becomes a political entity as well as an artistic unit."[28]

From Jones I draw on details of Ngema's life that resonate with my own observations of *Sarafina!*, such as the way Jones characterizes Ngema as a theater artist committed to using musical theater as a weapon for social action. For example, while Ngema had already named his own theater company "Committed Artists,"[29] Jones structures her biography of Ngema as

[24] Roberta Uno, "Mbongeni Ngema: A Theater of the Ancestors," *Theatre Topics* 4 (1994), 1:18.

[25] Ibid., 21.

[26] Ibid., 23.

[27] Ibid., 25.

[28] Ibid., 19.

[29] Laura Jones, *Nothing Except Ourselves: The Harsh Times and Bold Theater of South Africa's Mbongeni Ngema*. (New York: Viking/Penguin Books, 1994), 115.

a narrative of various obstacles Ngema has overcome in the effort to make his musical theater, and in doing so presents Ngema as the ultimate "committed artist." Both scholars of Ngema should be considered essential critical reading on Mbongeni Ngema and the *Sarafina!* musical.

Ngema began his professional life in the theater under the tutelage of Gibson Kente, who is regarded as the father of black South African theater and who was making his popular work at the time.[30] Kente pioneered what is known as "township theatre," which used music, comedy, and a presentational, non-naturalistic style of acting—"highly physical, very animated, and broad"[31]—to address issues of social responsibility at the level of the individual. The loud, direct address to the audience and the exaggerated facial expressions in *Sarafina!*, for example, are hereditary traits of Kente's township theater practice, which required non-amplified actors to project their sound and hold the attention of the gathered crowd. Ngema began making his own work with Percy Mtwa, a musician who was also part of Kente's touring cast.[32] Eventually, Ngema found his own voice as a solo artist.

Woza, Albert! is a darkly comic play in which a Jesus figure chooses apartheid South Africa as the site of his return but is arrested rather than praised. The two-man play, co-written and performed with Mtwa, was a tremendous success and went on to tour the United States in 1982. Ngema's next play *Asinamali!* (1983), which he wrote by himself, was another critically successful international touring production for Ngema. *Asinamali!* is a play for five actors, set in a South African jail. This conceptually structured play is built around a series of stories the jailed men tell, describing their various life experiences and the

[30] Ibid.

[31] Roberta Uno, "Mbongeni Ngema" 16.

[32] Ibid., 69-75.

circumstances of their arrests. Ngema is certainly not the first or only black South African playwright to use prison as a metaphor or setting, but many of his plays (*Woza, Albert!*, *Asinamali!*, *Sarafina!*) feature an arrest and a jailed figure. Ngema had in fact been sent to prison twice—once on a trumped-up reckless driving charge and once for his outspoken criticism of the government in his work with Mtwa on *Woza, Albert!*.[33] While Ngema managed to physically escape from jail after his first arrest, he served a month in prison after the second arrest, and that personal experience inside the apartheid criminal justice system likely influenced his decision to include scenes and stories of arrest and imprisonment in all his major plays.[34] It is in any case easy to imagine that the conceptual notion of prison itself operates powerfully in even daily black South African discourse about citizenship under apartheid, since prison exists in opposition to the ideas of mobility and freedom.

Ngema had been searching for a new idea for a show while *Asinamali!* was on tour, and during a conversation between Ngema and Winnie Mandela, who was also in exile at the time, "the resistance leader underscored the strength of the children in South Africa's liberation struggle."[35] Mandela was referring to the famous 1976 Soweto Uprising, "when, after refusing to accept Afrikaans ("the language of oppressors") as the medium of instruction, hundreds of schoolchildren were massacred by the South African police."[36] Ngema decided to tell the story of the South African students' fight for full citizenship rights on a Broadway stage in order to give encouragement to his own people and to the diaspora in general, just as much as he also intended to draw worldwide attention to South African

[33] Ibid., 24-31.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Daphne Topouzis,"Sarafina!: The Music of Liberation." in *Africa Report* 33 (1) (1988), 65.

[36] Ibid.

struggle and call for immediate political action. Like *Lost in the Stars, Sarafina!* was created in part as an intentionally political movement, through art, toward a sense of fuller citizenship, though Anderson and Weill's view of the racial construction of citizenship differed from Ngema's in ways I have been suggesting.

Ultimately the entertaining but subversive power of *Sarafina!* is evident in the fact that although most black-affirming shows were prohibited from being staged in black townships in South Africa itself, the South African government gave travel visas to Ngema and his cast and crew. Presumably the South African government approved the touring of *Sarafina!* in order to show the world that South Africa also valued the arts and intellectual exchange.[37] Whatever the real motivation, *Sarafina!* on Broadway was performed under the shadow of a government-sanctioned sense of criminality surrounding black South African citizens. It should be remembered that Hugh Masekela, co-composer of *Sarafina!*, was living in exile from South Africa at the time the show was on Broadway.

Sarafina! debuted briefly at South Africa's Market Theatre in Johannesburg before traveling across the Atlantic to the intimate Mitzi Newhouse Theater space in New York's Lincoln Center for the Arts. It was held over three times past its initial modest engagement there, and early in the following year it transferred from this off-Broadway space to a larger Broadway house, where it enjoyed a successful run, earned wide critical praise and a few Tony Award nominations (though it won none of them). It toured for a while after that and the show's international acclaim allowed its creator Mbogeni Ngema to launch a second *Sarafina!* touring company in 1988. The eventual global success of the show was itself a subversive gesture to an apartheid government so invested in the criminalization of its black citizens.

[37] It is interesting to note that Jones was able to find no information as to why the group was allowed to travel, and at least according to the interviews she conducted, the actors themselves do not know. See: Jones. *Nothing Except Ourselves*. 130-134.

The City as Corruptor of the Citizen

Paton's source novel begins with an ode to the land. This association of the rural with good citizenship survives in the stage adaptation, but in the hands of Anderson and Weill this rural good is positioned uncompromisingly in opposition to an urban evil, embodied throughout most of the musical by Absalom but suggested through various references to a rural-urban tension. All characters associated with the city of Johannesburg, for example, are represented from the first scene as either corrupted or doomed. Grace calls Stephen's city brother John "an evil man."[38] Stephen laments that because his son Absalom has gone to the city he is likely to become "only a drop in the great river of blacks that pours into the earth and is seen no more!"[39] As Stephen moves from Ndotsheni to Johannesburg and back again, the musical charts a round-trip journey through the racial and moral chaos that is the space of the city and establishes the space of the home as the beginning and morally-anchoring end for this journey. Anderson and Weill champion the realm of the rural and domestic as moral and necessary to a recuperation of national citizenship, and contrast this with representations of a morally corrupt city space.

However, in demonizing the city, Anderson and Weill depart significantly from Paton's source novel and support the existing stereotypes of young urban black presence as a criminal presence. Weill and Anderson's vision of the land-loving universal citizen makes little room for questions of race-based land inequality, and without focusing equally on the moral decay of urban whites, posits the black performing body within urban space as the only other logical source of this social and environmental decay. Anderson and Weill attempt to affirm the moral superiority of rural, domestic space. The inadvertent effect of using a

[38] Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill, *Lost in the Stars*, 4.

[39] Ibid., 5.

story that features a black crime at its center to do this, however, is to suggest the inherent criminality of urban black spaces and young, urban black men.

Absalom is shown to have set up a home in Johannesburg with his girlfriend Irina, and the audience is made to understand through Stephen's search for his son that Absalom and Irina would also be welcomed home in Ndotsheni. Yet Absalom wants full citizenship, and complains in Act One, Scenes Six and Seven about the racist citizenship practices and labor concerns of South Africa—problems which to a degree are also present in the United States at the mid-century. Absalom's desire for a full citizenship that is also urban is linked not to his moral interest in providing for his family and finding a sense of happiness, but instead to his immoral interest in pursuing wealth at any cost. In a sense, the city is evil here and Absalom's motives within it become corrupt as well. Once the first-born and only child, and the embodiment of Grace and Stephen's emotional and economic hopes for the future, Absalom has become the fallen adult within the space of the city. His fall from innocence into criminality is epitomized by a number of stage actions: the murder he commits, his public trial and pre-death confession, and the failure of his own and his father Stephen's appeals to a larger, external morality—society, the justice system, or God—to save his life. The external appeals fail precisely because Anderson and Weill want to emphasize the idea that racial harmony and a restoration of national citizenship will only occur through the commitment of individual, internally-driven social action. In the character of Alex, Anderson and Weill present an answer to this failure of urban society and of black youth.

The Under-Appreciated Vision of "Big Mole"

The optimism of "Big Mole" and its scene of inter-racial friendship offers strong evidence for Anderson and Weill's anti-racist citizenship argument and is perhaps all the more remarkable in the fact that it is a theatrical choice wholly original to Anderson and

Weill, and not one derived from the source novel. On the surface, the song "Big Mole," and the short scene that follows it, appear to comprise nothing more than a crowd-pleasing interlude that for some reviewers seemed more at home in a traditional musical theater comedy than in a piece striving for the seriousness and emotional expansiveness of operatic tragedy. As the lights rise on the start of the scene, Alex is seen "playing with a little Negro boy and girl" in front of Stephen's village chapel with a homemade toy he has made.[40] The lyrics to "Big Mole" sound like a novelty song about an industrious garden creature, but on closer examination the song and its presentation serve as an anti-racist argument for urban black citizenship. The bouncy song, in a tempo equivalent to a vigorous skipping pace, is divided into three different verses, each followed by the same, slightly varying refrain, which describes its anthropomorphic main character, Big Black Mole. Sung by the child Alex in what is his only solo in the musical, the story of "Big Mole" is presented in a third-person, past tense narration, allowing Alex to present the character of Big Mole as a kind of urban cultural folk hero. The song uses Anderson's equivalent of a rural black dialect, in which phrases like "three miles" become "three mile" and suggest a broken but easy version of spoken English, further emphasizing the sense of the folk and rustic in the song.

In the verses of the song, Alex tells both his on-stage and in-house audiences that Mole's remarkable skills were also ones that he was naturally suited for: "He'd dig in the earth like you think in your mind."[41] As the song progresses, the connection between the mole as a creature who lives underground and the daily lives of South Africa's young black men is made more explicit:

[40] Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill, *Lost in the Stars*, 75.

[41] Ibid.

ALEX: When Mole was a younker they showed him a mine;
He said, "I like the idea fine,
Let me have that hose, let me have that drill."
If they hadn't shut it off he'd be boring still!
And down at the bottom he chunked all around
Till he chunked out a city six mile in the ground![42]

What is remarkable here is not the idea that Mole loved to dig, since that is what moles do, but that this Big Black mining figure used his talents to create a city. Mole built a new urban space through his own talent and industriousness. This work was made possible through his use of the tools owned by those in power ("let me have that drill") who originally showed him the mine. Because Mole's original task was to work the mine, it is possible that this underground city was also built without approval and was an urban space where perhaps Mole is king.

Most provocative in "Big Mole" is the refrain. The refrain provides the singable anchor for the song, and its simple statement about the impressiveness of the deep holes Big Mole would make slyly masks more subversive readings of the lyric, which speak to black visibility:

ALEX: Whenever you come to an oversize hole
Down at the bottom is Big Black Mole![43]

One reading of the line is to see an awareness of the African diaspora situation within racist society—that there are oversized holes (in society? In the political process?) at the bottom of which one can find the nation's black citizens. In other words, a hole is not just a hole, but evidence of the racialized, divided life of the nation. Another reading of the line is even more subversive and speaks to black agency: despite the holes or pitfalls the Black Mole was forced or chose voluntarily to dig for himself, at its bottom he was not merely waiting or feeling victim, but instead was actively creating something out of his situation.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

As I mentioned at the start of this chapter, the notion of virtuosic performance and creation is doubled in this moment. On one level is the story of Big Mole, on the other is the character of Alex (and the actor portraying him), who proves both Big Mole's mastery of his situation and his own through the performative act of song and dance. A production photo of this scene illustrates this doubling. The photo shows two black children seated on a moveable set piece near Stephen's chapel, with Alex's homemade toy set up between them.[44] The white boy Edward stands on stage, too, having just entered the scene, and the three children are shown smiling and laughing as they watch Alex (played by the actor Herbert Coleman) dance and sing on stage before them. Alex is bare-chested here (as he is through the entire show) and wears only shorts and dance slippers. In the photo he is seated on the stage floor with his arms stretched out to the side and his legs splayed before him as if he has just fallen down on his backside. The stage is bare around him, giving him room to move freely, and he faces the in-house audience as he sings, open-mouthed, and feigns surprise. The photo shows that Alex's performance of the song "Big Mole" includes at least one moment of physical clowning and hints at the vocal and physical mastery of Coleman's performance, which made Alex's solo a highlight in most reviews of *Lost in the Stars*. *The New York Times*, for example, described Coleman's "magnetic charm,"[45] and *Time* described Coleman as "bringing down the house with Big Mole."[46]

Having watched Alex's virtuoso performance, Edward is moved to compliment him:

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[44] W. Eugene Smith, "Lost In The Stars" October 10, 1949, Photo from Editors of *Life* Magazine. Online at "Lost In The Stars,"Google, http://images.google.com/hosted/life/196c247efc47e17c.html, (accessed July 18, 2013).

[45] Brooks Atkinson, "' Lost in the Stars,' the Musical Version of Alan Paton's 'Cry, the Beloved Country"' *New York Times* (1923-Current file) (New York, 1949), 21.

[46] "New Musical Play in Manhattan," *Time* Magazine (1949)7 November 1949 **54**(19): 84.

EDWARD: You know, there's one thing I have to say for your voice—it's loud. It reminds me of Jericho.

ALEX: Jericho?

EDWARD: Yes, the man that knocked the town over with music.

ALEX: It was Joshua that broke the walls of the city with music. Jericho was the name of the city he destroyed.

EDWARD: How do you know that?

ALEX: My uncle read it to me out of the Old Testament.[47]

Edward's initial statement to Alex is a veiled compliment: rather than tell him he is a fine or engaging singer (as the audience may have felt), he tells him that his voice is "loud," which at first sounds potentially insulting. The compliment is in his reference to Jericho, which would be understood by Alex to be a compliment only if Alex was literate enough in Western culture to understand the reference. The reference to the musician of Jericho carries with it the connotation of a divine gift and a key to liberating one's self and one's people from oppression. Following so quickly behind the "Big Mole" song, this dialogue exchange emphasizes the idea of the power that inheres in the performing body of a young person, who also happens to be a black male.

Alex not only understands the reference, he understands it more fully than Edward and proceeds to correct the white boy—to educate him. Humbled and excited with his social discovery, Edward warns his new friend, "don't sing as loud as you can around here, or some of these walls might go down."[48] The comment is meant as a joke that acknowledges the shabbiness of the homes in this part of the village. However, the comment also registers concern for the way Alex's public performance of excellence and achievement and the vision

[47] Anderson and Weill, *Lost in the Stars,* 76.

[48] Ibid.

of anti-racist citizenship that he and Edward are beginning to practice are forms of political and social challenge. As such, their encounter is dangerous as much as it is fun and surprising.

The two boys laugh and talk together, in an expression of the social equality and possibility of friendship that is now between them. Edward even begins to learn about his own race and class privilege when he asks Alex for milk and Alex explains, "We have no milk. Nobody has milk in Ndotsheni."[49] Edward asks about the toy digging machine, and Alex explains that he made the toy, which symbolically aligns him again with the Big Black Mole of his song. Like the Mole, Alex has the talent and intellect to use the presumable barrenness of his surroundings to create not only a digging machine toy that kept him and his friends entertained, but to create a song and persona through which he was able to celebrate his own achievements. Edward proceeds to give some design feedback to Alex about his digging machine, allowing the Broadway audience to envision the two as equal collaborators, designing the perfect backyard toy. But this interracial bonding is brought to a sudden end by the arrival of the elder Jarvis, whose appearance sends Alex running off behind the chapel. Their future friendship is suggested by Edward's decision to challenge social custom again—this time in full view of his grandfather—by saying goodbye and waving to Alex. Alex returns both gestures since Edward's public performance of these gestures first is understood as a form of social permission—the same kind of permission James Jarvis criticizes his son Arthur for giving to Stephen in Act One, which the observant Edward had witnessed.

Act Two, Scene Five is an expression of a vision of citizenship which not only sees non-whites and whites on an equal footing of respect (if not yet of material resources), but

[49] Ibid., 78.

acknowledges the performing black body as one of power and intelligence, and points to the service and assistance whites must provide to bring about greater social equality. What is remarkable about the kids' scene is its originality as a product of Anderson's imagination. There is a brief exchange in *Cry, the Beloved Country* between Stephen and Jarvis' grandson around the learning of Zulu words, and this moment includes the boy's dismay at learning about the inequality of resources among the blacks of Ndotsheni.[50] However, no such lengthy exchange similar to the one Edward and Alex engage in exists within Paton's source novel—the two boys are never shown together.

Understood as a response to Act One, the semiotic message of Act Two is one in which the hope for national citizenship resides in each individual's return to rural values. Alex is a city boy "rescued" from a potential future of urban corruption and given a second chance in the rural space of Ndotsheni. He is shown to be happy in the country, an attitude his performance of "Big Mole" seems to support. The optimism of both Alex and Edward, as pastoral children, is contrasted with the cynicism of Absalom and his urban peers. The labor difficulties and oppression that Big Mole must endure are metaphorically distanced from Alex's reality by being told in song and by Alex's status as a child not yet part of the nation's workforce. The collaborative spirit Edward and Alex display with each other concerning the toy digging machine suggests a future for them that is free of inequality and the lack of respect that perhaps has created the social-economic holes Big Mole and Absalom have figuratively and literally fallen into. By presenting Alex as an unspoiled version of his cousin Absalom, and as a human version of the intrepid Big Mole, Anderson and Weill suggest through this choice that Alex replaces them both. In Alex, the optimism missing from Absalom and embodied in Big Mole is re-formulated as the optimism of early youth. In

[50] Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (New York: Scribner, 1948; 2008), 268-271.

this new form of optimism Alex and Edward both emerge as effective agents of change in Ndotsheni's future while displaying for the audience the cultural dimension of citizenship. While Alex's performance of "Big Mole" was unanimously praised when *Lost in the Stars* debuted, the song's much-needed emotional lightness, in the context of the tragic plot that surrounds it, masks the more provocative, anti-racist citizenship work that the Act Two, Scene Five dialogue and "Big Mole" song actually accomplish.

Broadway musicals in the second half of the twentieth century did not often feature people from the African diaspora, and ones that did generally did not address the realities of the racialized struggle for full citizenship in their plots in any critical or extended way. Shows like *Hallelujah, Baby!* (1967), *The Wiz* (1975), *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1978), and *Dreamgirls* (1981), primarily focused on fantasy or the uncomplicated fun of black performance culture. Musicals that did address the realities of racialized struggle for full black citizenship focused on African diaspora life in the United States and the Caribbean, and not in Africa. However, even these shows tended to romanticize the virtues of rural space, much like *Lost in the Stars* had done, and thus despite the levels of affirmation of Africanist culture in these shows, they still reinforced the notion that the urban space of the city—and its potential for generating new and powerful forms of citizenship—was not appropriate for black people, as evident in shows like *House of Flowers* (1954), *Jamaica* (1957), and *Purlie* (1970). Even the later-in-the-century Broadway musical *Ragtime* (1998) participated in this tendency by presenting the tragedy of urban black citizenship as an inevitable and foregone conclusion.

From 1949 through the next four decades, the particular theme of racial intolerance in South Africa was also not frequently staged within the Broadway musical after *Lost in the Stars*, and when it was staged—as in shows like *The Zulu and the Zayda* (1965) and *Ipi-*

tombi (1977)—the theme was treated with the same frustrated, "Can't we all just get along?" attitude. These shows were plentiful in their sympathy for the oppressed but short on thorough critiques of the societal power structures generating that oppression. *Sarafina!* offered a new energy and a new conceptual approach to the theme of racial citizenship in South Africa.

A Different Kind of History Lesson

Having established a sense of "school" through the stage design and through the ensemble's song and dance practices, Ngema offers a radical black critique of the space of school and of its citizenship curriculum. The critique of what is taught in school is most visible in the significance of the Morris Isaacson history classes. The history class scenes give *Sarafina!*'s "non-linear" book its structure. The Broadway audience is introduced to a number of different classroom moments, in different areas of study, but it is within the context of the two history classes in Act One that the first real plot conflicts emerge.

The history class of Morris Isaacson High School, as it is represented on stage, is a space of direct social action and politicization. A new law has been announced, declaring Afrikaans, and no other languages, to be the language of educational instruction for all black children. This criminalizes and marginalizes the Zulu language, its unique patterns of storytelling, and its histories, which are not written in or shared in Afrikaans. The female student Sarafina rallies her classmates to protest. She is identified from the start of the show as a popular peer leader through her own dancing, her dialogue, and even through an ensemble song performed in her honor. In this first history scene she shows the audience why the other children pay her honor by being the person who gives voice to their concern and interests. Sarafina shouts, "Away with Afrikaans!" and within moments the entire

history class is jogging in place, pumping their fists, and chanting "Nelson Mandela is a hero! We know this government is shit!"[51]

While Ngema's classroom scene seems to capture the spirit of social unrest in Soweto in 1976, the achievement of Ngema's writing is that he chooses to set this historic unrest in the context of a *history* class. The history classes in Act One of *Sarafina!* send the message that the entire musical is on at least one level a battle over establishing a different history of black South Africa. The school is an important space for the formation of citizenship. The battle over history is also therefore a battle over the forms of citizenship that will be sanctioned and legalized by the nation, and becomes the first major conflict of the musical. The children understand that the law making Afrikaans the required language is a law intended to criminalize Zulu culture and to write them out of world history. The fictionalized representation that is Ngema's musical *Sarafina!* participates in and shapes world history by introducing the real story of Soweto youth rebels and other black activists into global popular entertainment culture.

In the second history class scene of Act One, the history class itself is deemed a space of criminal activity. The school teacher—humorously named "Mistress-It's-A-Pity" due to her habit of saying "It's a pity"—announces to the class, "we are going to learn about the oil-producing countries."[52] In keeping with previous history classes, Mistress intends to use her time with the children to teach them about world history according to the Zulus. She intends to teach a world history in which Africa and its nations are contributors to modernity. Mistress and the class begin a lively song about the oil-producing countries, overheard nervously by some armed soldiers. The song's celebration of these countries reaches a

[51] Mbogeni Ngema, *Mbogeni Ngema's Sarafina!: The Times, The Play, The Man.* (Nasou / Via Afrika, 2005).

[52] Ibid.

boiling point for the soldiers when the name of Libya's famous leader, "Muammar Gaddafi," is introduced and chanted in the song.

Gaddafi was Libya's leader throughout most of the twentieth century, and allied himself famously with many African nations, championing their independence movements. As *Time* has reported, Gaddafi "was also instrumental in the foundation of the African Union as an attempt to institutionalize pan-Africanism and African self-sufficiency."[53] Gaddafi's heroic image has generally been tarnished in the United States because of his support of African dictators like Uganda's Idi Amin and because of his famous removal of U.S. and British military bases from his country. As a cultural-political figure in a number of African nations, he remains popular and heroic, and this is evident in the fact that even one of Nelson Mandela's grandsons is named Gadaffi, in his honor.[54] It is presumably this rebellious and pro-black African aspect of Gadaffi that provokes the ire of the soldier overhearing the history class.

Brandishing his gun, the soldier interrupts the history lesson and threatens Mistress, eventually assaulting her. The school children come to her defense and manage to humiliate the soldier. Rather than accept this loss of respect the soldier escalates the situation by firing into the crowd of school children. More soldiers enter the scene, and what had started as a history lesson about black African independent resources and self-determination turns quickly into a moment of state oppression and the criminal massacre of school children. The great uprising of 1976 has begun. In Act Two, the politicization of the children moves outward from the stage to surround and summon the Broadway audience in a collective act of witness.

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[53] Alex Perry. "Libyan Leader's Delusions of African Grandeur." *Time* Magazine, February 22, 2011.

[54] Chothia Farouk. "What does Gaddafi's death mean for Africa?." *BBC News*, October 21, 2011. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15392189 (accessed July 18, 2013).

Blurred Boundaries: Victoria Mxenge and Mandela Walk Among Us

Ngema blurs the boundaries of performer-audience, of performer-role, and blurs even the temporal boundaries that separate past history from present, lived experience. In his second significant theatrical choice, Ngema uses role-switching and direct audience address to show us—as listener-watchers of history and community storytelling—that we are participants in that history and storytelling. We are left with a moral imperative to act because the story is now part of our lived experience.

The first boundary blurred is that line between performer and audience, as is evident throughout *Sarafina!* in Ngema's use of direct address. I mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation that the first lines of dialogue in the musical come to the audience in the form of a direct address by the character Colgate, who introduces the students of Morris Isaacson High School and addresses the Broadway audience with an inclusive and associative "we." Throughout the subsequent scenes, songs, and dances that the ensemble of *Sarafina!* perform for each other and for the Broadway audience, little distinction is made between the two groups of listener-watchers.

For example, during the funeral for massacred children near the end of Act One, the priest begins his sermon with a call to all the "Children of God!"—a call he repeats in the sermon and means to refer to all people assembled within the sound of his voice. The priest says, "America and Great Britain have sold too many guns to Africa, to fuel black-on-black confrontation." This line gets some applause and calls from members of the Broadway audience. It seems from this sympathetic response to his message that at least some audience members are also blurring the line between the imagined funeral-goers and the real watchers of this imagined funeral service. In other words, these more responsive members of the

Broadway audience are performing as “participants” in a funeral they are initially assumed to only witness as an audience.

The blurring of the performer-audience divide also occurs during the song “Mama,” when some of the soloists walk out into the audience during the song, and again at the close of the show. During the curtain call and prior to the brief musical reprise performed as a show encore, the cast members come down from the stage and shake hands with a number of people seated in the front row. Like *Lost in the Stars*, *Sarafina!*'s redefinition of the practice of citizenship presents it as a shared practice. However, *Sarafina!* emphasizes this point about sharing not just through Ngema's choice to stage a black urban community struggle. This is a struggle many Broadway audience members would already feel a shared investment in due to the global concern over apartheid by this point in history. Ngema also emphasizes the idea of sharing through his use of the sharing of storytelling attention.

Performed roles are shared in *Sarafina!*, and Ngema blurs the boundary between performer and role by allowing members of the ensemble to share the task of representing not just the students of Morris Isaacson High School but also the adults, community leaders, and government soldiers who populate their world. Members of the ensemble portray soldiers, a Zulu priest, children from other Soweto schools, and other members of the Soweto community. In a comic scene in Act Two, members of the ensemble portray both a soldier who has just arrested some children and also that soldier's superior officer. The absurdity of detail in South Africa's apartheid legal code, as described through the soldier's argument with his superior, helps highlight the immoral criminalization of the school children.

Most provocatively, *Sarafina!* also blurs the boundaries between the sense of a contained, closed story that is past history and the sense of an open story the audience and

performers are actively creating and participating within—a living history. This happens in Act Two as Sarafina and her classmates argue about their planned concert and the thematic ideas they will choose to help them structure this public event. Sarafina suggests that the show should focus on Mandela coming home on the day of liberation. Through this plot choice Ngema is expressing both the optimism that black South Africans felt about their struggle in 1976, as well as his own optimism for South Africa's present moment and political future.[55] Sarafina nominates herself as the candidate to portray Mandela. Another student, a boy named Crocodile, challenges her for the role, presumably on the basis of his shared gender with the real Nelson Mandela. By way of response to this challenge, Sarafina seems to suggest that there is another more important quality that makes her a better candidate, because she quiets her classmates in the midst of their argument and begins to tell the story of Victoria Mxenge.

Victoria Nonyamezelo Mxenge[56] was a black South African civil rights activist and lawyer who, even after her lawyer husband was murdered and mutilated, continued to fight tirelessly for the cause of black freedom and for the humane treatment of youths detained by the government. She was martyred as a cultural and political hero when she was attacked by a group of white men and then murdered at her home in front of her children. During Sarafina's telling of Mxenge's story, the ensemble cries, and at the mention of her death the students begin to sing a rolling, rhythmic lament called “Mama,” which further blurs the boundary between performer and role, and performer and audience. The word “Mama” repeats again and again. It forms the refrain of the chorus and sonically mimics the repetitive

[55] Mandela would remain in prison a few years after the debut of *Sarafina!* and in 1988 was not guaranteed to walk free in his lifetime.

[56] The name “Mxenge” is technically pronounced with a click, which I am unable to duplicate. The closest approximation to the proper pronunciation of her name that I can manage in English is “mah-KEN-geh”.

nature of crying. The “mama” in the song's lyric is sung from the point of view of Mxenge's children. The students, as on-stage audience members for Sarafina's story-performance, embody and give voice to these historical children. The students of *Sarafina!* are simultaneously themselves in the scene yet have also become the children of Victoria Mxenge in Sarafina's on-stage story, and in doing so engage in the same role-swapping and boundary-blurring that has characterized much of Ngema's theatrical practice throughout the musical.

The “mama” in the song's lyric is also sung from the point of view of the ensemble, who as performers and black South African citizens pay honor to Mxenge as their collective “mama” in struggle. In terms of its function within the immediately discernible world of the musical, the introduction of Mxenge's story affirms the nobility and hard struggle of all black women, and serves as an answer or testimony to Sarafina's bid to portray Mandela at the school concert. On a deeper, more structural and aesthetic level that most critics of *Sarafina!* have missed, the inclusion of Mxenge's story affirms the blurred boundary of past-present and the sense of living history Ngema is concerned with portraying. The act of participating in and making a new, anti-racist history of South Africa (and by extension a new history of the African diaspora), is emphasized in Ngema's choice to have Sarafina exit before the final school concert begins. Sarafina re-enters the stage space during the concert dressed (as she had wished) as Nelson Mandela.

After singing a number of songs in the musical's closing concert, the ensemble begins to sing a song about Nelson Mandela. Sarafina enters as Mandela in a kind of “political drag” performance. She is barefoot, wearing a beige, short-sleeved uniform shirt and pants. The suggestion is that she is barefoot because, as Nelson Mandela, she has just been released from prison, or perhaps she has removed her shoes out of a desire to feel her feet in contact

with the land itself, from which she has been separated. In either case, Sarafina-as-Mandela walks to the front of the stage and addresses the Broadway audience, calling for the liberation of South Africa, and by extension, the liberation of all Africa. The music playing underneath Sarafina's speech comes to halt as Sarafina pushes the political commentary even further, calling on "The spirit of Stephen Biko, MLK, Malcolm X."[57] Sarafina's litany of names, some South African and some North American in origin, gets a range of responses from the Broadway audience.[58] At the mention of "Malcolm X" someone even yells "Yes!" Ngema's choice to include a litany of names is a common textual strategy of his (as well as a Zulu tradition),[59] He employs it in his other signature works, most notably *Asinimali!* and his more famous and collaborative piece *Woza, Albert!* Ngema's names in *Sarafina!* are all names of martyrs or heroes known for their struggles to end racist citizenship in their nations, and their invocation in public space has a powerful register for people from the African diaspora.

Rather than tell a story that excludes whites, however, Ngema uses the ensemble to engage and include all members of the audience regardless of race. "Whites," for example, is a term rarely if at all mentioned in *Sarafina!* Instead, the crime of the nation is attached to the ideologies and policies themselves, and not to people or particular cultures. This choice may have been necessary for Ngema in order to secure international travel and financial support for he and his cast members, but one result of this choice is the lack of blame or guilt assigned through any stated way to European Americans or white South Africans.

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[57] Ibid.

[58] This is apparent in the video recording of the Broadway production I have viewed, archived at Lincoln Center.

[59] Francis Ngaboh-Smart, "The politics of black identity: Slave Ship and Woza Albert!," in *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (1999): 167-185. Ngaboh-Smart (1999) and Uno (1994) both discuss this aspect of Ngema's stagecraft.

Sarafina! ends, like many Africa-focused Broadway musicals do, in a sequence of celebratory and energetic dances. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the choice to end a musical or theatrical piece with pageantry is made in many performance traditions around the world, and is noticeable as a feature of western opera and ballet. In terms of more recent influences, the notion of staging a concert as a way to solve or respond to a community concern is also a cliché for early American stage musicals and is a particular mainstay of the Hollywood film musical as well. But the choice to end a public presentation or gathering through pageantry and dance is just as common in African cultures, and Ngema seems to acknowledge all of these possible cultural influences when he ends the school concert with a sequence of dances, some featuring traditional Zulu dress and some in urban-styled costumes that suggest a more pan-African, black nationalist, or even global audience.

Conclusion

In *Sarafina!* the theme was still racial intolerance, and like *Lost in the Stars* before it, the show's solution for society was a message of hope amid the tragedy of apartheid. In both cases, this message of hope was first an aesthetic understanding, developed through the feel-good engagement of song and dance. This aesthetic understanding, which both shows' creators felt could transcend racial division, would then theoretically lead audience members to a shared, moral understanding of civil society. The moral impulses behind *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!* emerge from their creators' transnational life stories. For example, Mbongeni Ngema's idea for an ensemble-based theater that would serve as a political arm for his people developed after he visited the U.S. and spent time with Chicano playwright Luis Valdez and the unique musical and political theater of Valdez's El Teatro Campesino. Ngema's literal engagement with Chicano politics helped inspire him to be a more "committed artist" and create opportunities for other black South African performers

through the existence of his troupe. In the histories of both shows, the transnational life journeys of their creators point to the larger potential Africa-focused Broadway musicals have as models for a kind of global activism through performance. Anderson, Weill, and Ngema intentionally designed their shows to be models for global activism. In doing so, *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!*—like many Africa-focused Broadway musicals, point to a conception of the global citizen, one who is both consumer and witness, musical theater patron and social protest participant.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Africa-focused Broadway musicals responded to the prevailing discourse of racist authenticity. When the reality of public and widespread racial conflict demanded more attention in the second half of the twentieth century, the prevailing discourse around blackness shifted to that of citizenship and, underneath it, racialized concerns about the preservation and security of the nation. Africa-focused Broadway musicals again responded to this prevailing discourse. By the 1990s, aesthetics and public display were tools increasingly used to identify or locate people in their diversified citizenship practices, and both of these tools had become essential elements in the negotiation of global race politics, global economics, and global entertainment. A consideration of Disney's *The Lion King* helps us understand the current centrality of aesthetics in the shifting discourse of black racial difference, and reveals the way the Broadway musical theater industry uses the consumption of aesthetics to negotiate the pitfalls of racial discourse.

Chapter Three – Africa as a Celebration of Cultural Commodification: Disney's *The Lion King* (1997)

In Act One, Scene Nine of *The Lion King* (1997) on Broadway, a lion named Mufasa (played by Samuel E. Wright) gives his disobedient young male cub Simba (played by Scott Irby-Ranniar) a disciplinary but nurturing lesson on manhood. Director and puppet-maker Julie Taymor has styled King Mufasa's mask as a lion-faced headdress that Wright wears. The round, yellow mask is much larger than a human head (roughly the size of a car tire) and features a carved wood, stylized face of a lion in its center. The closed mouth and deep-ridged eyebrows of the carved lion face convey the seriousness of a king and the inherent physical and symbolic power we know that lions possess. The lion's mane is even more abstract in design, represented by three rows of open-ended, circular wooden hoops connected to the lion face by a series of smaller wooden spokes that each terminate in a small, golden, raffia-looking, fan-shaped brush. The radiating golden brushes, forming a kind of halo around the central carved face, suggest the rays of the sun, while the movement of the individual brushes mimics the movement of a real lion's fur in sunlight. Taymor's stylized lion mask for King Mufasa seems to perfectly replicate for the stage the essence of that character as he is seen in the original, animated film. However, Taymor's design and directing choices offer more to the viewer than a live replica of a cartoon.

The otherwise vacant expression of the carved face allows the actor Wright, whose face is fully visible beneath it, to express the full range of King Mufasa's passion for his kingdom and concern for his young son. Similarly, Young Simba's face is not obscured by any covering except the painted lines that both Irby-Ranniar and Wright wear on their faces and necks to support the idea of their characters' primal natures. Through face paint and costume

pieces like their baggy, yellow and brown pants decorated with tribal designs, audiences can imagine that the two actors portraying these characters are talking lions, yet what is inescapable is the fact that they are also visibly non-white. The visibility of the actor's faces and the ability of the audience to see them as racially *black* faces are central to the critical power of Taymor's theatrical choice, which is meant to affirm the presence of black males on stage. This aim is underscored when she has Wright deliberately remove his headdress—the essence and visual center of his whole animal costume—in full view of the audience as the scene with Young Simba grows more serious.

What begins as a stylized adaptation of a Disney animated film scene between two anthropomorphized, male lions becomes a symbolic commentary on black male identity and black fatherhood in this moment of de-masking. Public discourse on the crisis of black fatherhood reached its height only two years before with the Million Man March on Washington in 1995.[1] Organized by controversial black nationalist and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, the march was designed to inspire hope and action as a way of addressing the widely held perception that black male presence and leadership was missing in black families and in American civic life. Taymor's theatrical choices engage in controversial public discourse and anchor Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway to its historical moment in the late 1990s. This allows the stage musical to serve as an anti-racist response to the animated film it is based upon. Critics who dismiss *The Lion King* on Broadway as preserving the film for the stage miss Taymor's anti-racist and anti-sexist deconstructions. Like many Africa-focused Broadway musicals, *The Lion King* on Broadway employs a stylized Africa that engages in the prevailing discourses of cultural

[1] "THE MILLION MAN MARCH." 1995. *The Washington Post* (1974-Current File), Oct 14, 1. http://search.proquest.com/docview/903550401?accountid=14522.

consumption and racial difference while attempting to do subversive, anti-racist and anti-sexist work.

In this chapter I argue that Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway celebrates the cultural commodification of its "Africanized" aesthetic.[2] However, this celebration and the presence of an aesthetic that is markedly African are Taymor's theatrical responses to the racist and sexist aspects of the film version. Her choices also address the Broadway industry's historic treatment of black women and artists from the African diaspora.

Taymor stages her celebration in three different ways. First, she simultaneously celebrates black generality and South African specificity on stage by drawing on cultural elements to create the musical's Africanized aesthetic. While this aesthetic is in its totality a mixture of European-American, African, and Asian cultural expressions and is not "authentically" black, it is taken by Taymor and by the Broadway audience to represent blackness. This is visible in the racially marked costume designs previously mentioned. Taymor's aesthetic is partly anchored in black authenticity through the inclusion of South African Zulu music and other Zulu cultural quotations, and this celebration of a pan-African or generalized blackness rooted in South Africa is visible in the Zulu song "One by One," which serves as the entr'acte (or musical overture) of Act Two. In general, the presence of

[2] By "Africanized," I mean the intentional modification of something to reflect an African identity. In popular discourse the term is most frequently used in news stories beginning in the l970s to describe the northern migration of hybrid European and African honey bee populations from South America into the United States. These populations originally came to Brazil through human transport, and mated with local honey bee populations. The new, more aggressive breed of bee is known to sting in swarms of many thousands, leading in a number of cases to human fatalities due to the sheer number of stings that victims can receive from this species. The hybrid, migrating bee has been commonly referred to ever since as the "killer bee." Thus, the term "Africanized" carries connotations of something that is artificial while also containing some sort of potential threat for a culture or populace. These negative connotations are useful in my critical consideration of Taymor's theatrical, racialized choices. See Mark L. Winston's *Killer Bees: The Africanized Honey Bee in the Americas* (Harvard U. Press, 1993) for a history of this species and its invasive migration pattern, published within the same decade as the Disney film and stage show.

Taymor's aesthetic blackness is discernible in the structure of the show and celebrated by its corporate producers. Africa as a representation of a stylized blackness is not denigrated in this theater, and for this reason Taymor's imagined, Africanized aesthetic is a significant intervention in black representation on Broadway.

Second, subversion is evident in the way Taymor celebrates the presence of black women as national and community leaders. This celebration of black women is visible in the transformation of the Rafiki character from a male in the film to a female in the stage production, and in the expansion of Nala's character for the stage, evident in Act Two, Scene Two and her solo "Shadowland." The secondary status of women as wielders of material and political power is thus symbolically challenged through Taymor's casting and directing choices. Third, Taymor's theatrical choices effect actual material change for blacks working in the Broadway industry and for performers from South Africa. This change is visible in the on-stage appeal for financial support made at the start of the show and in Taymor's color-conscious casting and employment policies.

The Lion King on Broadway is not problem-free. Some of the more fascinating aspects of Taymor's use of racial representation as spectacle in *The Lion King* are the way the musical's spectacular images ultimately escape both her control and her ability to effectively explain them. By presenting her diverse cultural expressions as an Africanized aesthetic detached from their historical and political contexts, Taymor and Disney claim their project to be "universal," when in reality *The Lion King* on Broadway's Africanized aesthetic is in some ways a "blacked-up" spectacle of middle class abundance. In this way the musical unintentionally serves the social constructions of unmarked whiteness and problematic class divisions, and normalizes imperialist consumption practices. This double-edged sword of the power of spectacle is most visible in the "Circle of Life" song. This animal parade, which

both opens and closes the show, fills the stage with its exotic yet orderly abundance of color and consumable forms—as if to point emphatically to the centrality of an ideological message about consumer abundance. Far beyond its debut, *The Lion King* on Broadway continues to raise questions about cultural appropriation, cultural definition, and global flows of cultural and ideological power. As I will show in this chapter, Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway has as much symbolic and material significance for black performers as it has for the larger popular American discourse on racial and economic difference.

My study of *The Lion King* draws on my observations of the show at a 2:00pm matinee performance at its Minskoff Theatre location on Broadway, in New York City on April 13, 2011. This chapter is also informed by an interview I conducted the following day with cast member Jim Ferris, who plays the 'standby' or alternate actor for the bird Zazu and who performed the day I attended the show. In addition to these experiential sources of information, I rely on reviews of the film and stage show published at the time of their debuts, in addition to scholarly criticism published during the subsequent years of the film's mainstream distribution and the stage show's long Broadway run. Because this discussion necessarily must refer at times to various incarnations of the story, I shall refer to the film as '*The Lion King* film,' the stage production and its moments of performance as '*The Lion King* on Broadway,' and will reserve use of the phrase '*The Lion King*' by itself to refer specifically to the plot shared by both the film and the stage musical. Before we look at the subversive work Taymor attempts in *The Lion King* on Broadway, we must first understand the allure of the Africa represented by the original, animated film and the legacy of problematic politics within the film that Taymor's critical stage adaptation inherits.

A Succession of Kings

As one of the nation's most powerful and longest-operating generators of mass entertainment and influential pop culture images, the Disney Company had been criticized for years about the absence of positive, nonwhite characters in its films. *Song of the South* (1946), for example, was set in a nineteenth-century, pastoral, American south and featured three animated animal fables told by their live-action narrator Uncle Remus (played by African American actor James Baskett). Baskett spoke in a Negro dialect and embodied the century-old stereotype of the plantation "darky." Many black artists asked to participate in the making of the film refused on the grounds that the film celebrated the same stereotypes mid-century blacks worked to eradicate. In what was perhaps the most public condemnation of the film upon its debut, a *New York Times* review described Disney's representation of blackness as "a peculiarly gauche offense" in light of the public debates being held on black racial difference and citizenship.[3]

Two decades later, a jazz-inflected orangutan ape character in the highly lucrative *The Jungle Book* (1967) seemed to draw unfortunate comparisons between African Americans and animals in the midst of the nation's civil rights struggle and was also publicly criticized.[4] Other Disney films made during the course of the twentieth century were controversial for their portrayals of Asians, Middle Eastern people, and women. As a result, by the 1990s the

[3] Bosley Crowther, "Spanking Disney: Walt is Chastised for '*Song of the South*' Strictly From Dixie Double Cross," *New York Times*, December 08, 1946, 85.

[4] Gregory S. Parks and Danielle C. Heard, "'Assassinate the nigger ape': Obama, Implicit Imagery, and the Dire Consequences of Racist Jokes," in *Rutgers Race & the Law Review* (2010): 259-323. Parks and Heard review the popular history of the black-person-as-ape in their discussion of how this racist trope is used in political cartoons concerning President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama.

Disney corporation was simultaneously famous as a powerfully wealthy and iconic image-producer, and infamous for its continuous problems with racial and gender representation.[5]

Further complicating the public and critical reception of *The Lion King* film was the fact that when it debuted, public discussions about black representation in popular entertainment in general had reached a heated climax. In the cultural climate of the 1990s the Disney Company's decision to feature anthropomorphized animals from the continent of Africa, and not to feature actual black African people or any of their historically specific struggles, was arguably a crudely disingenuous, racist way for Disney to respond to the decades of mass calls for more positive black representation in Disney films. Despite the possibly ignorant or dubious motives behind their choices, Disney's new film nonetheless depicted the various physical spaces of the African continent as one singular realm of paradisiacal beauty and seductive, nonhuman peace.

The allure of *The Lion King*'s Africa resides in its abundant physical beauty and nonpolitical "universal" quality. Rather than representing an Africa we might discover is as diverse and divided a continent as any other, complete with long and conflicting interests, histories, and cultural traditions, Disney's Africa depends on the audience's recognition of Africa as a beautiful monolith—symbolized in the figure of the lion king and more concretely in Pride Rock, which looks over its film and stage musical worlds. Africa here is a place of unity and an endless source of unproblematic inspiration. The experience of Africa through Disney's design presupposes that there is an "Africa" that can be experienced

[5] Mia Adessa Towbin, Shelley A. Haddock , Toni Schindler Zimmerman , Lori K. Lund & Litsa Renee Tanner, "Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films," in *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 15:4 (2004), 19-44. Towbin, et al. survey twenty-six of Disney's most popular feature-length animated films for their constructions of gender, age, race, class, and sexual orientation as a way of assisting family therapists. They come to the same conclusions arrived at by many film and literary theorists, which is that "gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes have persisted over time in Disney films" (Towbin et al., 19).

in the first place. The capitalist, touristic desire of Disney's representations of Africa cast the experience with the continent in *The Lion King* story as a wholly family-friendly and aesthetic experience. This is an Africa that engages almost all of the cultural representations of the continent that we have ever seen in our national and popular imaginations. It is a place of beautiful bounty, a place of untapped resources, and a place of primal encounter with wildness and animal predators. The Africa of Disney's *The Lion King* seems to whisper that Africa has the capacity to fulfill our dreams of place.

This is a seductive suggestion for all Americans across racial, gender, and class divides, since it is a suggestion that has for so many generations helped shaped our national perception of the continent. Curtis Keim, for example, writes about the history of African safari and tourism in Western popular culture, and sees in *The Lion King* film's depiction of animals the same attitudes that shape the history of the safari:

> The hunter and the tourist go to Africa for similar reasons even though they scoff at each other's motives. The hunter claims that photographers cannot perceive what nature is really like because they are observers and not participants. The photographer replies that hunters are predators who upset nature's reality. Yet both imagine they can glimpse life as it was before humans became too numerous. […] The whole safari experience [...] is part of the whole Western pattern of experiencing the world. And as such, it reconfirms what we already believe about Africa...[6]

The motives that Keim suggests both the safari hunter and the safari tourist share have to do with what he sees as a Western desire to reduce the world into containable, controllable "experiences," which ignore the human and natural concerns of the part of the world facing this reduction and control. Disney's choice to not feature human characters was then interpreted by many as a way of popularizing a fantasy image of a controlled and problem-free Africa.

[6] Keim, 121-124

Disney's celebration of a beautiful and abundant (if strangely unpopulated) African continent was praised by most people across class and racial divides, and this praise can be logically inferred from the film's record-breaking ticket sales, which dwarfed ticket sales from all of Disney's three previous blockbuster films. A *Los Angeles Times* article reported that *The Lion King* film was "the third fastest film in history to net $100 million" in box office sales, an achievement exceeded only by *Jurassic Park* and *Batman*.[7] The dominant, national response to *The Lion King* film across racial lines was overwhelmingly positive.

Quieter critiques of the film's racialized representations did surface with its initial release and theatrical run, and continued even after the film won two Academy Awards, was transferred to video and DVD formats, and had more completely entered the homes and lives of American families across class and racial divides. These criticisms primarily addressed the film's problematic relationship to racial and gender stereotypes. However, when published in non-academic settings, these criticisms were generally rejected by majority opinion. An editorial in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, for example, described the "uproar" that occurred when the paper published an editorial that was critical of the film: "In four days, we received 140 phone calls, faxes and letters, almost all of which denounced author Neil Chethik for criticizing the Disney blockbuster."[8]

The Broadway stage adaptation of the film opened on November 13, 1997 at the New Amsterdam Theatre. It later moved to the Minskoff Theatre, where it currently runs in its fifteenth year in continuous production on Broadway. *The Lion King* on Broadway retained the film's same basic plot and added more music to become a full-fledged musical. The

[7] G. Whittell, "African critic stalks lucrative lion," *The Times*. Los Angeles, Times Newspapers Limited, 1994.

[8] M. Kress, "From Our Readers Into the 'Lion's' Din," in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. (Atlanta, GA: The Atlanta Constitution, 1994).

original film only had a handful of songs, and some of these were part of the background score. These augmentations helped the stage adaptation achieve a record-breaking popularity much like its source film. Evidence of this popularity is the fact that since its opening *The Lion King* on Broadway has been produced in 28 countries, has won six Tony Awards including Best Musical in 1998, and has been seen by "more than 55 million visitors worldwide."[9] Its initial popularity was due to its plot faithfulness. Fans of the ninety-minute film were pleased to see that most of what they remembered and expected to see on stage was preserved in the longer and more detailed stage adaptation, running at two hours and forty minutes with an intermission.

The basic story of the *Lion King* on Broadway is faithful to its predecessor, beginning with a panoramic view of the African safari. Crossing before the view of the audience is a kind of "Noah's Ark" procession of all the animals of the land, visually inventoried as they gather at the feet of the great king of all animals, Mufasa the lion. In this fictional version of the world, all the animals live harmoniously with one another. Even though we (as viewers and audience members) see animals that are biologically meant as each other's food source or territorial enemy entering the same space, they do not attack each other. Instead, the animals sing praises or perform obeisance to King Mufasa, who theoretically could consume any of them if he so chose. The animals do more than merely accept their status as consumable forms. They celebrate and explain their contentment with that status through the song "The Circle of Life," heard as a vocal background in the original film and transferred to a live chorus in the stage adaptation.

The opening parade of animals is meant to symbolize the unity of all living creatures, but this seemingly innocent metaphoric unity has a specific structural organization that is

[9] *The Lion King* Playbill. (New York: Playbill, Inc., 2011), 29.

thoroughly political (there is a king, a ruling class, and a servant class), and that lends itself easily to darker interpretations. The repetition of the phrase “the circle of life” emphasizes the processes by which a community, nation, or world sustains itself, and the fact that the animal characters are given human voices, names, and personalities further underscores the story as a societal fable. Thus, a celebration of consumption and contentment with one's place in the global hierarchy is the first significant idea conveyed by *The Lion King* on film and on Broadway.

As the opening anthem comes to a close and the story begins, we learn that King Mufasa's wife Queen Sarabi has recently given birth to a child, their son and heir Simba. The animals gather from all parts of the land to pay homage to the future king and consumer, and the presence of the animals in a birth scene suggests the Biblical nativity of Christ scene. The king's brother Scar is present for his nephew's birth but he is furious. As the story develops Scar emerges as a central, driving figure in the conflict, for he sees the birth of Simba as a potential end to any dreams he has held about coming to power. Scar arranges for King Mufasa to die in a stampede he initiates, then convinces little Simba to blame himself for the death of his father and to leave the Pridelands forever in shame. Once under Scar's power, the Pridelands fall into physical and moral decline while Simba grows into maturity far away in the jungle, strong now but still emotionally shackled to his shame. Rafiki discovers Simba is alive and convinces him to return and claim his place on the throne, which the adult Simba does after a final encounter with his evil uncle Scar. Simba marries Nala, his friend from youth, and the story, as it is represented in both film and Broadway stage versions, ends with the royal couple presenting their new cub in a continuation of their species (and by extension, the harmony and order the animals had all previously enjoyed under King Mufasa).

The Lion King film is easily readable as an imperialist, racist, and sexist analogy of human class relations, since a king and his ruling class are momentarily threatened by poorer, morally deficient subjects, who just happen to be characterized in action and in voice by racialized, gendered, and class-oriented stereotypes. After a series of trials this ruling class (unmarked by stereotypes and thus readable as "white") is restored to power in the rise of Simba. The larger hierarchies of power and consumption which order this universe are simultaneously restored as well. Viewed through a Marxist lens, the film is a dark, imperialist parable for anyone concerned about social and economic justice for poor and oppressed peoples. The film also raises previous criticisms of Disney's habits of racist and sexist cultural representations, and these criticisms are well-deserved even amid the enduring popularity and beloved place of the film in popular culture.

However, *The Lion King* on Broadway's plot parallels to the animated film original have also led to the stage musical not being fully appreciated as a distinct work by most of the writers who were critical of the film. Kirk A. Hoppe sees *The Lion King* film as "a parable of patriarchy, heterosexual monogamy, and racial hierarchy" which, in its circulation on video and DVD throughout American homes, reinforces the meanings of the imaginary African space throughout the country.[10] Because the story can easily be read as a parable of these social ideologies, critics of *The Lion King* on Broadway who bristle at the spectacle of African animal pageantry and its relationship to African realities often use a similar line of argument, asserting that the stage musical accomplishes the same work. For example, Maurya Wickstrom's much-cited 1999 essay from *Theatre Journal*, "Commodities, Mimesis, and 'The Lion King': Retail Theatre for the 1990s," argues that the stage version is merely a clever incarnation of the film, and that both film and stage version are commodities masked

[10] Hoppe, 182.

as art.[11] Wickstrom's criticisms are important but her largely Marxist reading of the film and stage versions, and her unexamined binary between commodity on the one hand and pure art on the other, obscures the complex pleasures and powers of live theater. More importantly, her binary view fails to recognize the anti-racist and anti-sexist work present in the stage version as conceived and directed by Julie Taymor.

Taymor's work does not directly critique the larger ideological frame of cultural consumption that survives the story's journey from film to stage. It should be remembered that most Broadway musicals, as commercial entertainments, do not make critiques of consumption, and the lack of this particular critique should not be the basis of aesthetic judgments made about them. I echo Bert O. States here when he says, "the problem with semiotics is that in addressing theater as a system of codes it necessarily dissects the perceptual impression theater makes on the spectator."[12] *The Lion King* on Broadway produces a number of code systems, and scholars have rightly identified many of these codes as being sexist, racist, and classist. But joining these codes are those produced in the phenomenological, sensory experience one has sitting in the Minskoff Theater. This phenomenological experience works against the totalizing reading of the show as wholly problematic and oppression-supporting that some of *The Lion King*'s critics have leveled against it, and yet this experience is provided to the audience primarily by the sensory—and in some aspects consumable—pleasure of the performing black body. I argue, however, that in the case of *The Lion King* on Broadway, the fact that these bodies are racialized mostly enhances rather than detracts from their performative pleasure. Rather than dismissing *The Lion King* on Broadway as merely a more creative, more lucrative, and more culturally

[11] Maurya Wickstrom, "Commodities, Mimesis, and "The Lion King": Retail Theatre for the 1990s," *Theatre Journal*, 51, no. 3, Theatre and Capital (Oct., 1999) (1999): 285-298, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25068677 (accessed June 25, 2013).

[12] States, 7.

influential version of the film's problematic racial representations, Taymor's work should be understood as a specific theatrical response to the racist and sexist problems of the original film. When considered against the animated film, three of Taymor's more significant theatrical choices make *The Lion King* on Broadway a critically different experience.

Creating a Universal Aesthetic that is Generally Black (and Sometimes Specifically South African)

Taymor's first significant theatrical intervention in the cultural legacy of Disney's *The Lion King* is her creation of a "universal" and celebratory aesthetic for the stage that is formed out of a range of cultural ingredients but is ultimately made legible as an "African" aesthetic. The presence of South African cultural elements makes Taymor's aesthetic clear and also lends this aesthetic an added authority. By "universal" I mean the quality of something that is meant to circulate in society as an object or social property unmarked by race, class, religion, gender or other social categories and that is understood as accessible to all. Taymor's blend of elements from different cultures makes her aesthetic a purely hybrid one, but her choice to mask this hybridity as "South African" repositions the cultural elements taken from that nation as the centering, admirable norm in the discursive universe.

Taymor's universal-but-Africanized aesthetic is noticeable in the multicultural design of puppet masks, puppet armatures, and other costume forms that allow the racially marked bodies of the mostly black cast to be visible to the audience. The black bodies of the actors appear alongside the fictional and supposedly nonracial characters those bodies are meant to animate, and this suggests a playful form of masking that has characterized black performance in the white-dominated spaces of the circum-Atlantic world[13] for centuries.

[13] My sense of the politics of black performance within the "circum-Atlantic" world is influenced by Joseph Roach (1996), who coins the term as a way of arguing that the rapid change of commodities among the 17th century societies located on the Atlantic Ocean and their genocidal histories are both elements central to the development of the culture of

Despite the non-African origins of much of her design work, Taymor's designs feel "African" because her design concept makes the viewer pay attention to the performing black body within the design itself. In other words, the presence of actual, racialized bodies helps Taymor authorize her designs as "African."

As in classic Broadway musicals of the mid-century, the theater itself becomes celebrated as a commodity in Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway, and the Africanized performing body within the show is valued as central to this celebration. Of course, the minstrel show also held the Africanized performing body as central to its theatrical celebration. However, Taymor's choice to cast nonblack actors as the clownish and villainous characters works against the anti-black mockery of minstrelsy. This choice is made legible through the actor's voice, the actor's visual appearance in costume, and through publication within the Playbill program of the actor's photo out of costume. The show is on one level a celebration of the cultural commodification that the film characters represent, since they are understood by the audience as American cultural products and as properties of The Walt Disney Company. The show is at the same time an antiracist celebration of theater and the labor of (mostly black) performance.

Taymor's design concept was developed from her work with puppetry techniques in Bali and Indonesia. She calls her Asian-inspired concept the "double event." In this concept, the actors' leggings, costumes, face paint, and headdresses all indicate they belong to or are a part of the animal puppet they operate. Yet Taymor has designed each puppet so that some aspect or part of the human operator remains visible at all times. Rather than attempt a sense of magical escape by hiding the human aspect of the stage picture (as in a puppet in which the human operator is completely hidden from view behind a black screen), Taymor's double event concept in *The Lion King* on Broadway is about showing the

modernity. These elements leave their traces in community-based performances.

effort of theater and seeks to make the human operator visible in the art.[14] Yet because American popular entertainment producers have for generations made respectable and respected black bodies invisible or inconsequential on stage, their increased *visibility* and celebrated status in *The Lion King* on Broadway serves as an antiracist affirmation of a Broadway supportive of racial and ethnic diversity.

Taymor's costume and puppetry techniques in *The Lion King* on Broadway are Asian, and while they become Africanized in part because of the presence of black performing bodies, they also become Africanized because of the presence of additional elements taken from different African cultures. These elements collectively telegraph to the audience the idea of a generalized blackness through the presence of a singular and easily readable "Africa." In Taymor's Africa, different cultures and regions of the continent are referenced and celebrated as a connected whole. For example, *The Lion King* setting in all of Disney's incarnations is primarily the safari—an East African location. Some of the key words and phrases of the musical, including character names like "Simba" (meaning "lion") and the main catchphrase "Hakuna Matata" are Swahili in origin and thus also point to East Africa. However, the debated origins of *The Lion King* story point to West Africa.

Many critics argue that the story is a re-telling of the traditional tale of Sundiata, a West African figure. Adwoa X. Muwzea (1999), for example, joins Artz in drawing attention to

[14] L. Artz, "Animating Hierarchy: Disney and the Globalization of Capitalism," *Global Media Journal*, 1, no. 1 (Fall) (2002). Like a number of critics, Artz sees *The Lion King* film as an affirmation of the class-hierarchy and anti-social individualism that global capitalism encourages, saying "Producers are non-existent in Disney […] In ridding the animated environment of work and its necessary social relations," the normal, everyday functions of the city and the contributions from the majority of society are banished. According to Artz the focus on the privileged in Disney products like *The Lion King* film bury the image of the laboring body. While Taymor's work in showing the human operator in a puppet emerges primarily from her own views on the power of theater, that innovation is worth applauding here in light of Artz's criticism. Taymor's approach to staging the body in *The Lion King* on Broadway makes visible the labor of the actor that a typical Disney product would seek to hide.

the parallels between Simba and Sundiata. She reveals that the Disney crew did their research for the animated film in Kenya, and during this time a Sundiata book was published in 1992 and was reviewed by the *New York Times.*[15] Muwzea argues that it is unlikely Disney was unaware of the Sundiata story, and the choice made by the creative team and producers to ignore the connection in their public statements on the show is seen by Muwzea as part of Disney's longer, problematic history of disrespectful treatment of black life and culture. Other critics like Kuwahara argue that *The Lion King* story and the visual signature of the original film's animation are derived from Japanese animator Tezuka's enormously popular cartoon *Jungle Emperor*,[16] and the possible link to Japanese culture suggests yet another Asian element in Taymor's assembled aesthetic.

This mix of cultural influences and citations supports the already uniform picture of the African continent circulating in the American imagination. In *The Lion King* film, Africa is meant to be intentionally generic, monolithic, and essentialized. Byrne and MacQullian (1999) reveal this in their critical look at *The Lion King* film:

> *The Lion King* is set in a part of Africa that both is and is not locatable. The opening scene pans from the Victoria Falls, to Mount Kilimanjaro, to what may be the Niger Delta. These dispersed landmarks offer a shorthand for 'Africa the continent' whilst deferring any realisation of an actual place.[17]

In *The Lion King* on Broadway, this monolithic Africa returns through Taymor's collapse of different cultural aesthetics and visual techniques into a singular "African" look that is

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[15] Adwoa X. Muwzea, "Discourse on Disney: Bibliographic References & Women Playing in the Life of The Lion King," in *Nature of a Sistuh: Black Women's Lived Experiences in Contemporary Culture* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1999), 241-243.

[16] Y. Kuwahara, "Japanese Culture and Popular Consciousness: Disney's Lion King versus Tezuka's Jungle Emperor," in *Journal of Popular Culture* (1994).

[17] Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney,* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 102.

beautiful and commercially packageable. This monolithic aesthetic, which is not authentically African, hides black diasporic difference by erasing the specificity of Taymor's cultural quotations. For example, Sundiata is never mentioned and Swahili is never identified as a source language. These gestures, supporting the idea of a monolithic Africa, also hide black diasporic difference even as they simultaneously champion a kind of American-ized universal aesthetic—one that can be seen as pan-African in terms of its celebration of "blackness." This general blackness is physically celebrated through the presence of Garth Fagan's dance—a multicultural dance vocabulary which features but is not exclusively derived from Africanist dance gestures—and through the sonic presence of various African languages (Zulu, Swahili, and an additional array of other South African languages).

Yet not all celebrations of blackness in *The Lion King* on Broadway remain general. Taymor's monolithic, Africanized aesthetic celebrates a general, pan-African blackness but simultaneously celebrates a South African specificity. The South African quotations in the musical ultimately give *The Lion King* on Broadway and Taymor's Africanized aesthetic their strongest authorization. This authority is present in the entr'acte before Act Two, a song called "One by One." A chorus of African humans (not animals), enter singing a celebratory, *a cappella* song with lyrics in an African language. Although there are a few people with bird puppets in hand, and the chorus is dressed in bright-colored, "tribal print" robes that tie them by design to the birds, most of the chorus members do not carry bird puppets and thus appear to be wholly human and themselves.

The stage is bathed in a bright blue light. The presence of a few bird puppets and a pool of blue in the center of the stage suggests to the audience that this song, called "One by One," is metaphorically a kind of morning bird song, performed at a watering hole, and

literally a song performed at a community gathering. The fact that the lyrics are in a foreign language that most American audience members would not know conveys a feeling of strangeness to the lyrics that can evoke in the audience a fantasy of being in the wild. It is hard to specify what African language, since Lebo M.'s lyrics for *The Lion King* include a mix of IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, SeSotho, KiSwahili, Congolese, and SetSwana,[18] and the script for the entire show does not distinguish when one language versus another is being used. Thus, I will refer to the African lyrics of the show as "African." Rather than embrace only the potential cynical assessment of Lebo M.'s choice as supporting a notion of a monolithic, exotic African Other, we can examine the work of the song lyrics to see the moment's more subversive, anti-racist performance.

The formal structure is akin to many other Lebo M. songs for the show, in which a soloist begins and is answered in traditional call-and-response style by the chorus. In the show's typescript, the Zulu-identified African lyrics and their English translations are provided for this particular song. The first male vocalist sings, "Ibambeni njalo bakithi / ninga dinwa," which the text explains means, "Hold on tight my people./ Don't get weary." The weariness of the audience could in this case be a joking reference to the pace or effectiveness of the show up to that point, or to an emotional weariness or anxiety in having reached a point of crisis for the main characters. While these levels of "weary" can be suggested musically, the fact that the lyrics are in a foreign language point us to a different kind, or context, for this weariness. The singer is joined by other voices as they sing "Ibala lami," and the text tells us that this new section of the song translates as:

> The color of my skin
> That is dark
> I'm proud of it

[18] Ken Cerniglia and Aubrey Lynch II, "Embodying Animal, Racial, Theatrical, and Commercial Power in The Lion King," in *Dance Research Journal* 43, no.1 (2011): 3-9.

I'm proud of it
I'm proud of it
I will die with it[19]

Here, the link between the anthropomorphized animals and the humans they represent is broken. While birds can be said to be "proud" in the sense that many bird species have colors they choose to display, the expression of pride in one's darkness is specifically an African diasporic/black consciousness political gesture and not at all related to the fantasy Africa the first Act has presented. Furthermore, the song is performed in a melodic and vocal arrangement setting that is specifically South African Zulu, and thus suggests that the song may be making a political statement in regard to the history of apartheid in that country.

South Africa removed the ban on black political parties and freed black leader Nelson Mandela in 1990. In 1994, when *The Lion King* film was released, the African National Congress had won the country's first nonracial election only months before and sworn in former political prisoner Mandela as the first black president in its history. By the time of *The Lion King* on Broadway's debut in 1997, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission had been underway for a year, and the racist National Party had withdrawn from government.[20] In light of this South African news and history the song "One by One" becomes a subtle tribute to the progress that was achieved step by step and "won" in one move forward at a time.

Finally, the chorus sings the final lines of the song in English:

Oh yes
it's beautiful
in Africa[21]

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[19] *The Lion King: Typescript*. New York: New York Public Library, 59-60.

[20] Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa,* Third edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 275.

[21] *The Lion King: Typescript*. 60.

Without knowing African languages, most of the American audience members will interpret the lyric as a non-confrontational, non-political, and non-racial gloss on the aesthetic scene of beauty enacted by the physical sound of the singing and the costumes parading the stage. But the lyrics, in light of South Africa's recent history, point sharply to the notion of Africa as a racialized political space: Africa is beautiful because dark people can be proud within it. This pride does not preclude other races from being proud within the African space constructed here—it only naturalizes the presence of dark people in the space.

The song ends on the word "Africa." This sudden "translation" of the song, bringing with it the abrupt racialized and politicized contextualization of this stage-Africa, is potentially jarring to an audience that only moments before had been enjoying its incomprehensible beauty. The mention of the word "Africa," by black actor-singers who are not in animal costumes, identifies those actors as black humans connected to the realities of black suffering on the continent, and distances them from fictional, anthropomorphized animals.[22]

As the song ends the lights change, vultures cross, and the orchestra music grows ominous. The stylized, blue pool of water center stage slowly disappears into a hole, and this shrinking of water and associated drought image is solidified by a puppet of animal bones that then crosses the stage. It's an evocative finish for the song. When the stage story continues we are made to understand that the drought and lack are a result of Scar's governing and the presence of the hyenas in the Pride Lands. But before the actual story picks up again the audience is held in this moment of drought and lack, and suddenly, the specter of that Other Africa—the unpleasant one we hear about in the news—is staged

[22] Though the song is lively and beautiful, it was received with mild applause at the performance I attended, and I wonder to what degree that reduced applause (compared to the applause other songs received during the course of the performance) was connected to the intrusion of real Africa into the imagined Broadway space.

before us. It is a brief pause, but perhaps it is just long enough to cause a break or slip in our viewing of the comfortable and aestheticized stage-Africa. In any case, the audience is returned to the nonhuman world of Taymor's Africa, although the encounter with a real, human, and contemporary black African experience is perhaps not so quickly forgotten.

Populating Disney's Africa with Strong Black Women

Julie Taymor's second significant intervention in the circulation of Disney's *The Lion King* commodity is to use her casting and directing choices to expand the role and plot importance of one of the original film's main characters and to alter the gender of another. By enhancing the presence of Nala and making the male shaman-monkey Rafiki a female in her stage adaptation, Taymor transforms *The Lion King* on Broadway into a subversive celebration of black women. Through her choices women are not solely victims of global consumption processes but are important contributors and decision-makers in the moral, economic, and political life of nations and communities. Her gender interventions also address some of Broadway's historic practices regarding women in the musical theater industry. While Taymor chose not to expand the role of the Queen, a role that was marginal in the film and remains so in the stage version, her choices with Rafiki and Nala do give women a presence and centrality in *The Lion King* on Broadway that they did not have in the Disney company's original, animated film.

Nala's song and character arc are noticeable aspects of the expanded stage story. At one point Scar decides that what he needs is a queen. Although this decision emerges as an arbitrary desire midway through the musical, Scar’s decision to pursue Nala for his queen pushes her to make choices that develop her character. She enters Scar's Cave in Act Two, Scene One to plead with Scar about the problem their pride is having with over-hunting. Following Scar's failed attempt to woo her, the two have a brief fight. Scar vows to possess

Nala.[23] She sees this harassment as something that will continue unless some decisive action is taken. She decides to leave the Pride Lands. The lionesses gather to bid farewell to Nala, who will go hunt outside the pride lands for the sake of the entire pride's survival. The lioness chorus leader blesses her, and the actor's rendition of her song "Shadowlands" earns a hearty applause.[24]

The moment of Nala's solo journey and song resonates beyond its deployment in the plot by serving as a culturally specific touchstone for African Americans and for urban citizens in particular. If Nala is a stand-in for an urban woman and for a black woman, then her hard circumstances require her to venture into the larger world by herself, unsupported by black men or by Scar—who is intended to be understood as not truly being a "real" black man, with all that such a judgment might imply. She is supported instead by her community of women who struggle similarly, without a man. That Nala needs a man at all is one of the conservative suggestions implied by the stage story, but Taymor's decision to extend *The Lion King* on Broadway beyond the film's narrative scope by expanding Nala's role should be seen as a feminist gesture, supportive of the anti-racist, anti-sexist, and pro-working class positions we are expected to read Nala as occupying.

The point would be even clearer if Nala were already a mother raising a cub on her own. She is portrayed as brave and committed to working hard for her community, and—as her encounter with Scar shows—is committed to being valued beyond her capabilities as a

[23] This plot choice was perhaps made to secure some sense of heteronormativity for the character, who is depicted in the stage adaptation as an effeminate male.

[24] Chaunteé Schuler performed the role of Nala at the matinee performance I attended. The song, which was not part of the original film, is a ballad designed as an emotional moment for the character and audience, and is the only moment in the musical when the adult Nala is showcased. For this reason, most likely, this song gains applause whenever it is performed by an actor cast as Nala, who would need to be physically beautiful (to serve as the logical love interest for the show's hero Simba) and who would also need to have a singing voice skilled enough to successfully render the heart-rending "Shadowlands" song.

sexual being. This aspect of her portrayal is an important one. The fact that real lionesses in nature do hunt by themselves and do not do so out of hardship but naturally work "outside of the home" is an important detail in a stage world so transparently meant to serve as a stylized anthropomorphic parallel for American society. The extra attention that Taymor gives Nala, which was not present in the film, illustrates Taymor's gender politics. The show problematizes Nala's status as a single, working woman while at the same time honoring her for her labor and struggles.

The most compelling female character in *The Lion King* on Broadway is the monkey-shaman Rafiki. Producer Thomas Schumacher says, "When I compare the show to the film, Rafiki is the one who emerges most, because we get so much time with Rafiki."[25] Schumacher suggests that the staged version of Rafiki appears more central to the story because the character is given more scenes or dialogue, but the real reason for added gravity of the character is more subtle and involves Taymor's decision to make the staged Rafiki more visibly human, more noticeably serious, and to re-cast this main character from the film as a female.

The original, animated Rafiki was a monkey whose voice was provided by African American actor Robert Guillaume, who had been well-established as a television actor. The voice of Mufasa was provided by the even more recognizable African American actor James Earl Jones. Adult members of the film audience could easily recognize the voices of the famous actors and therefore could "see" the older lion and the monkey as raced characters. However, despite the presence of a noble black lion character (who is killed early in the film), and despite the fact that Rafiki is wise and depicted as genuinely humorous, Disney's choice to include a monkey character remained problematic. The presence of a humanized

[25] Thomas Schumacher, *The Lion King: Behind the Scenes* (Special 2-Disc Edition), Disney Theatrical Productions, DVD.

monkey figure who could so easily be understood as representing a black male and who was not a trickster (as in the Africanist tradition) but was occasionally depicted as comically simple (as in the racist Western tradition), did nothing to alleviate Disney's well-deserved reputation for trading in negative racial stereotypes throughout the history of its work on film. The decision to retain Rafiki as a monkey—and not, for example, to make Rafiki a wise bird or reptile—continues to speak to Disney's ideological gestures, which are made in full conversation with history and not within a cultural vacuum.

Yet for the stage show, the choice to make Rafiki visibly human, having her dark skin visible to the audience, showing her walking on two feet and not appearing as a puppet, all helps humanize the Rafiki role more than the voice work of the film manages to do. Furthermore, the staged Rafiki is a serious character, concerned in every scene with the well-being of others while also remaining comic. This more serious portrayal lends gravity to Rafiki's presence in the musical as a black woman in whom the greater wisdom and humanity of the story resides. Rafiki brings out the celebratory, pro-woman aspects of the stage show. Taymor makes Rafiki's significance clear when she locates the power of Rafiki as a stage portrayal within the phenomenon of her femaleness:

> She really became an important person in expanding and bringing something major to this piece that's not in the animated cartoon. [Rafiki is] a very funny character, but he does not have this virtuality that Rafiki now has. […] Not only was a great role created for a woman, but a woman both spiritual, soulful, and humorous.[26]

By “virtuality” I follow Turnoff's use of the word to describe a representation of reality that is meant to be taken as a substitute for reality but in its engagement with us pushes toward the idea of a new essence or new reality.[27] Taymor's invocation of it here suggests that while the cartoon Rafiki was a personable and humorous figure, the stage Rafiki provides a deeper

[26] Ibid.

[27] Murray Turoff, "Virtuality," *Communications of the ACM* 40(9): 38-43, 38.

representation of a real human persona, one more personable and humorous than before, and that this depth and greater sense of represented truth is connected to Rafiki's femaleness. Taymor's mention of the stage Rafiki being more "soulful" is also tied here to her femaleness, since it is through her that the moral of the story—the 'Circle of Life' ethos—is literally embodied. The animated Rafiki did not sing "The Circle of Life" opening song, which in all interviews Taymor and her collaborators identify as the thematic heart of the story in all its incarnations. The staged Rafiki, in contrast, sings the song at the opening of the show, and from that point forward remains firmly attached to the sense of energy, community-oriented focus, and morality of that initial performance.

The inclusion of a character whom the audience can read as both black and female also significantly expands the cultural possibilities of the production as the actor playing Rafiki can, through her voice, costume, and movement, insert culturally specific gestures and moments into a text that might in every other aspect appear too tightly controlled by Disney as a copyrighted property. The film Rafiki appeared to be a generic griot or shaman-type figure. While a typical American audience member of any race might not recognize how in the stage production Rafiki was given shades and subtleties having origins in authentic cultural practice, these refinements as gestures and details still enhance the sensory experience of watching Rafiki on stage. The added details in Rafiki's stage representation shape the way audiences interpret the semiotics of any scene she is present within. Associate Director John Stefaniuk describes Rafiki's characterization, explaining that:

> She is—what in South African culture is called—a "sangoma." And a sangoma is able to...interpret things from the past, and is able to see the future, and is able to heal, and is able to guide, spiritually, for the community.[28]

[28] Ibid.

South African actress Brown Lindiwe Mkhize, who played Rafiki in the London cast once *The Lion King* had begun to establish new productions of the show in other cities, described the importance of the *sangoma* to the community and, by extension, Rafiki's importance to the show when she said,

> In the community they are the ones to help people to realize that even when someone died in their family, you don't forget about that person. You always remember that person. You can ask things, and we believe that they will help us back […] She helps Simba realize his role in the Pride Rock. […] She needs to be there, and she needs to be this spiritual woman, this sangoma—the real sangoma.[29]

Mkhize is finding meaning in playing Rafiki as a sangoma. Though an audience member might not know enough about South African culture to make this connection, Mkhize and the other black women who perform the role of Rafiki essentially make it for them through their performances. Rafiki is widely mentioned as a favorite character of audience members who attend *The Lion King*, and Tsidii Le Loka, who originated the role of Rafiki, won the 1998 Tony Award for Outstanding Featured Actress in a Musical[30]—a validation of her talent as an actor as much as it was a validation of the choices made in the careful restyling of the Rafiki character.

Through gesture, inflection, even song, the actor playing Rafiki can and does make choices that move her and the members of the watching audience closer to a historical and culturally contextualized real. Schumacher echoes this when he claims, "By having the South African actresses play Rafiki, we get a much richer cultural view of the African element coming into the show, and we get a sense of, of *their* culture, and we hear *their* language."[31] While his word choices for describing South African cultural contributions to a

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[29] Ibid.

[30] "PLAYBILL," The Lion King on Broadway, (New York: Playbill, Inc., 2013) Web, *http://www.playbill.com* (accessed July 27, 2013).

[31] Thomas Schumacher, *The Lion King.*

show marketed and designed to embody all of Africa are problematic, since describing such contributions as “the African element” returns them to an American-created, monolithic African timelessness, Schumacher, Taymor, and Mkhize nonetheless are all laudably invested in rehabilitating the troublesome Disney script for a larger, anti-racist world audience.

Celebrating the Economic Possibilities Involved in Staging Africa

Taymor's third significant intervention in Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway is to celebrate the multi-directional processes of global commodification and the ways these processes can benefit artists from the African diaspora. This is seen in Taymor's demands that Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway will 1) be fiscally responsible in some way to at least one of the cultures it has appropriated (in this case, to South Africa); 2) make the casting of actors from South Africa a contractual requirement of future *Lion King* productions; and 3) keep certain roles racially marked for the continued employment of black performers on Broadway.

The appeal to the audience as global consumers is made in all Broadway musicals through the gift shop and through the ads in each show's *Playbill* program, but Taymor begins *The Lion King* on Broadway by having a cast member, in full costume, come to the lip of the stage while the main curtain is still drawn closed. The cast member then makes a direct financial appeal for a South African performers' fund from the stage. The cast member reminds the audience that following the performance, he or she and some of the other costumed cast members will be mingling with the audience out in the lobby following the show. This appeal to the charity of the Broadway audience on behalf of real black African citizens interrogates to some degree the positioning of the audience member as consumer,

though these gestures do not disrupt that basic positioning within the commercial field that is popular musical theater.

Perhaps most significantly, Taymor's casting choices employ a great number of black performers who would not otherwise (arguably) find employment in that highly competitive but historically racially biased industry. *The Lion King* franchise continues to be a significant vehicle for the mass employment of artists from the African diaspora working in the popular musical theater. Despite supporting the troublesome social messages of the inherited *Lion King* story, the black performer in *The Lion King* on Broadway also conveys socially useful, anti-racist, and class mobility messages by being visible to the audience in her lucrative and coveted job as a member of a Broadway cast.

It is true that the presence of black actors in a Broadway musical can be read as a cultural lure, whereby the complicity of black performers in the show helps to secure approval in black audience members. Critics also argue that the show and its clone productions in other cities might lock black performers into a habit of resurrecting performances of the exotic and essentializing not just black cultures but any tribal cultures as ahistoric. However, this criticism ignores the historic reality of the lack of opportunities for black shows on Broadway. I argue that the presence of performing black bodies in *The Lion King* on Broadway must be read in the context of the discriminatory history of Broadway and American culture—a history that had excluded those bodies. Thus, the appearance in *The Lion King* on Broadway of black performers takes on a kind of energy and importance it would not have otherwise.

Dance critic Deborah Jowitt (1998) wrote in the *Village Voice* on the boon the show has been for black performers. In it, she interviews a number of dancers working in the original

Lion King on Broadway cast, explaining that the show offers salaries that are significant compared to what might be found elsewhere in New York's theater scene:

> ...the Disney megahit is a potential bonanza for dancers of color. […] Few dance companies guarantee 52 weeks of paychecks; seasons grow and shrink. […] Equity minimum for chorus is $1135 per week with $5 to $15 add-ons for "specialties" (from making the set revolve to performing a solo). Then there are perks like the residuals from an American Express commercial some of the dancers did with Taymor, and royalties for singing on the original cast album. [...] They needn't think twice before hailing a cab.[32]

In addition to a great salary, a Broadway show offers other more intangible kinds of stability that extend from this financial support and dependable performance schedule—including free time in the day to devote to classes, other work like teaching, and raising a family. The fact that *The Lion King* on Broadway may be the only opportunity for black performers in any given season to find that kind of financial stability and potential class mobility is significant, too.

Taymor's most visible anti-racist gesture is probably her influence on Disney's contractual decisions regarding the casting of *The Lion King* on Broadway. By contract, "every production with the exception of Japan [sic] has a minimum of five South African singers."[33] Even more controlled is Taymor's directive on casting, which requires that certain roles be played only by black performers, while other roles are reserved for non-black performers. Because most of the main characters in *The Lion King* on Broadway are royal figures, Taymor's actions amount to a kind of affirmative action for the theater which aims to preserve a space for black actors to portray positive, anti-racist, and anti-sexist characters on Broadway.

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[32] Deborah Jowitt, "Lion's Share: Black Concert Dancers Storm Broadway," *The Village Voice*. (New York, 1998), 161.

[33] Cerniglia and Lynch, 6.

The fact that the character of Scar is a blackface (or in this case, brownface) character challenges those who say a racial reading of the show is an over-reading. Taymor requires that Scar always be played by a white male actor—never by a black one. Her reasoning, which she has articulated in a number of interviews, is to avoid supporting negative stereotypes about black men by having the black males portray only heroic figures in the musical. *The Lion King* film cast British actor Jeremy Irons in the voice role of Scar, and he performed the part with his British mannerisms intact. Some argue that he heightened other mannerisms and as a result gave his portrayal of Scar a kind of effeminate and histrionic quality that is seen by many as a damaging stereotype of homosexual people. But it is the Britishness of the voice—its apparent "whiteness" in sound—that continues to be employed in other casts of the musical, so that the role of Scar is heard as white even if the actor is not perceived as white beneath his brown make-up.

Yet the actors playing all the other lions are African or African American and are not required to mask the color of their skins, which in turn emphasizes the fact that the only other actor playing a lion in the musical is not only white but is wearing brownface. We might ask at this point, if we understand and accept Taymor's reasoning behind her color-apparent casting, why she put the white actor portraying Scar in brownface at all? Why not choose to make the fair-skinned actor a lion whose villainy would potentially be readable as connected to his whiteness? Perhaps one answer is that despite its more obvious comment on notions of blackness, *The Lion King* in all its incarnations never was and still is not intended to be a comment on constructions of dominant whiteness—even though the entire show is that.

For example, the bird Zazu is also played by a white actor in makeup, this time in blue face paint. This choice is mostly due to the design of the puppet, for the actor playing Zazu

is meant to represent the sky that helps animate Zazu and keeps him aloft. But since blue is not a natural human skin tone it is never immediately read as a signifier for a particular racial or ethnic group. Timon and Puumba are also played by white actors in face paint, but it is interesting that they seem to evoke a stage Jewishness or Jewish-Irishness in their Laurel and Hardy-style interactions. I am not arguing that the characters should be color-coded according to the race or ethnicity of their actors; I am merely pointing out that the choice to portray the good lions as golden-haired and evil Scar as dark plays into a well-established pattern of racialized reading in America—a reading that assumptions about the story's universal appeal or popularity among children will not dismantle.

The presence of black male and female actors representing leaders in the world of the play certainly supports a positive, anti-racist, anti-sexist social vision, but the presence of the brownfaced white actor does not evacuate the stage of damaging class-, race-, and sex-based stereotypes. Instead, it draws these figures into the action in order to be reassigned or re-purposed within the aesthetic politics of the musical. Ultimately, the question is whether Taymor's creative push against the forces of commodification through a highly consumable and marketed form like the Broadway musical is worth the problems it creates through its support of the flow of global commodity and unstable racial representations.

Aesthetic Politics and the Problem of the "Universal"

The intentions of The Walt Disney Company, Julie Taymor, and her creative team were to emphasize aesthetic appreciation by allowing the audience to feel themselves closer to the actual costumed actors and to their performing voices. The pageant of forms that bookends the show brings the costumed actors through the aisles and thus allows audiences to feel physically close to these traveling forms, while the use of *a cappella* vocal passages allow audiences to be as close as possible to the actual physical breath of the voice, unencumbered

or unmediated (at least in more obvious ways) by an orchestra or other technologies. The way the Africanized aesthetic operates here is to translate an idea about authentic blackness, moving this idea ideologically from the political, economic, sexual, religious, cultural and geographic presences it may have for an audience into a wholly aesthetic presence that is made safe and entertaining—and not unimportantly, is also shown through Taymor's craft to be manipulable. Blackness in this sense becomes a style. Blackness is style, it is performative, but it is not only this—in other words, it is not detached from hegemony and ideological warfare or constructions of a white national self that seeks to hide behind claims of the show's "universality."

The desire to inhabit an unmarked position is, in the history of Western art, North American public discourse, national history, popular culture and Broadway, a desire that is thoroughly bound in racial, gendered and class-based ideologies. *The Lion King* on Broadway is not free from this game. One thing that is fascinating is the way that the show's creators manipulate the term *universal* in all their various public interviews. When it seems to be to their benefit, the artists and producers involved with the show emphasize at times the Africanness or blackness of the show, while at other times the issue of race is downplayed or ignored in order to emphasize a "universal" appeal that allows the Caucasian creator or audience member to remain firmly seated in the unmarked, normative position. For example, the appeal of the show to Africans and African Americans is almost uniformly explained in terms of a mirror—in other words, that blacks enjoy *The Lion King* on Broadway because it offers an often-missing, esteem-filled representation of blackness. The distance of the show's racial imaginary from real blackness is rarely critiqued. On the other hand, the appeal of the show to Caucasians is generally explained as a response to the intellectual or aesthetic nature of the show—the magic of the puppetry or the wonder of its

craft. Is it not possible that whites respond to the show because it offers a specific vision of blackness that is appealing or desirable, in both racist and anti-racist ways? This possibility is ignored by most people who comment on the show, most likely because talking too much about what the show achieves in terms of racial representation would expose the way the show also simultaneously constructs whiteness. Even the effort to deny that the show constructs whiteness at all is instructive here, as examples of the creative team's views on the racial aspects of the show reveal.

In 1999, Performance Studies guru and experimental theater artist Richard Schechner crafted an interview piece for *The Drama Review* out of a discussion he had with Taymor on the nature of her mask and puppet work, a discussion he conducted two years after *The Lion King* on Broadway had made its successful debut. Taymor speaks in the interview about the importance of her training with Jacques Lecoq in Paris, in using the whole body as a mask: "Your body's like paintbrushes. It's completely non-characterological at first. You start with the neutral mask."[34] It would have been worthwhile for Schechner to follow up that line of discussion with questions about racial masks. What happens for the white actor or nonwhite actor when being "neutral" is automatically understood or figured as being the white (and unmarked) racial self? Masks help actors escape themselves, but in what way does a black mask fail to do this? Or, how can nonwhite actors adopt a mask that is ever "neutral" using their own body, as Taymor suggests (through Lecoq) that white actors can? Schechner fails to raise these questions, which I find surprising since we have in *The Lion King* on Broadway an instance of black and white performers wearing masks that are racially marked.

[34] Richard Schechner and Julie Taymor, "Julie Taymor: From Jacques Lecoq to *The Lion King*: An Interview," *TDR: The Drama Review* 43 (3, Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects, 1999), 36-55, 37.

Taymor raises the subject of race again later in the interview in a way that is encouraging and yet also disappointing:

> Which brings me to the only other thing that I want to say about *The Lion King*, something particularly important to me. The production is very interesting when you think about race in America. For white people, *The Lion King* has nothing to do with race. It's beyond race. It transcends race. For black people, it's the opposite. It's all about race.[35]

It is fascinating to me that Taymor's own discourse on race and universality in *The Lion King* seems to escape her control here. She discusses race as though she herself already occupies a "universal" location situated outside of those difficult boundaries and meanings. Like Taymor, I am encouraged that the show offers us an opportunity to talk about race in society and in the Broadway musical. A step toward honest discourse here is Taymor's acknowledgment that among all the various semiotic readings that the show receives are readings that are connected to or determined by a racial-cultural identity position. It is disappointing, and telling, that Taymor reads her audiences as divided into two discreet, like-minded groups of black and white (suggesting, too, that no other races attend the show), and that she also does not identify herself as one of those whites for whom the show joyfully and unproblematically "transcends race."

The show does not, in fact, even transcend culture. Ken Cerniglia, dramaturg for the production, and Aubrey Lynch II, an original cast dancer and associate choreographer and producer, describe in their jointly written article the cultural tension created by having a mix of black cultures in the cast, pointing out that,

[35] Ibid., 55.

> Some South Africans made it quite clear that African Americans were not African: African Americans have no language that connects them to "The Mother Land" and thus are no more African than any other American—skin color was irrelevant. This tension played itself out backstage and *colored* what happened onstage"[36] [emphasis mine].

Cerniglia and Lynch's use of the pun "colored" is delicious and intriguing, and in their text they explain that the backstage tension would often be evident in the way conversations would be held. They note that in America, it is often considered rude to hold a conversation in another language in front of non-speakers of that language, and apparently the South African cast members would regularly choose to speak in a South African language in a way that made some African American cast feel intentionally excluded. [37] However, these tensions were ultimately considered productive as each cast member, in working for attention and wanting their work to be valued, unexpectedly helped forge the unity of the cast out of this push for performance excellence.[38]

The show is meaningful and enjoyable to audiences. But a more honest discussion of *why* this is so would not assume a single "universal" mind that audiences tap into, but would instead acknowledge that the show circulates a number of complex ideas about society, race, gender, sex, place, and class that support and contradict each other in particular ways. The creators of the show acknowledge *The Lion King* on Broadway's global sources, but in insisting on its universality, above any national or ethnic particularity, the creators and the aesthetic they present can sidestep the responsibility to address any number of political conflicts related to their theatrical choices simply by referring back to the universality the show affirms.

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[36] Cerniglia and Lynch, 6.

[37] Ibid., 7.

[38] Ibid.

Conclusion

The film version of *The Lion King* is popular and continues to circulate its negative images around class, sexuality, gender, and race. However, spin-off films and sequels attempting to capitalize on the original film and establish *The Lion King* as a brand in animation potentially allow the negative ideas in the original to be addressed, amended, and perhaps replaced by more culturally sensitive representations within the same medium. The stage show is popular, and this fact, combined with the show's permanent location, also allows its positive, anti-racist and anti-sexist ideas about consumption to circulate and combat the negative images circulating in the film.

It may be that the sensory spectacle of *The Lion King* on Broadway is most effective at recuperating the original story and lending to the social space of the theater a celebratory energy that everyone can participate in without feeling disrespected along racial, class, or gender lines. The musical is full of visual and sonic pleasure, and not all of this pleasure is entirely at the service of imperialist or oppressive social forces. A consideration of the symbolic heart of the musical, the "Circle of Life" animal parade, is useful in thinking about the way the spectacle operates.

The first moment of the show is Rafiki belting out an *a cappella* musical phrase while standing slightly bent-kneed and holding a staff in one hand. She thrusts her other hand out into space in a stiff-armed gesture as she sings the first word, given in Zulu, and as she continues the phrase she accents it again with another hand thrust as if commanding or signaling to the world she sees before her. An unseen chorus of voices singing in Zulu echoes her musical line, and as these voices enter the sonic space, a male actor enters the physical space as if summoned by Rafiki. He wears a ram headdress and walks with two staves, as if on four legs, and he also sings an *a cappella* line in Zulu. Just as his phrase

finishes, another actor, also with two staves in hand and a horned headdress, enters from another part of the space and begins to sing.

The sung lines start at a full-voiced, belting volume, and all of the vocal lines either swiftly decrescendo near their end or the actors run to the end of their breaths with them. The listener in the audience perceives a sequence of sounds that build in dynamic energy and swell, one on top of the other, accented by ascending pitches and intervals that drop sharply, much like the building and crashing of ocean waves. Rafiki gestures again out into space as she sings another line, as if in conversation now with the two horned actors on stage with her, and as she sings this second passage, a golden sun rises in front of the purple and blue-lit cyclorama representing the pre-dawn sky. Rafiki is supported in this moment by the re-entry of the chorus of voices and the initial musical gestures of the orchestra.

The visual image of the rising sun, rendered as a shimmering ribbon sculpture that is lifted vertically above the stage, is pleasing in itself, but the addition of sound and the steady accumulation of fantastic bodies and color-shapes as more actor-animals appear, make the audience feel as though they are also rising. Emotionally, the opening scene can be disarming, and the production I witnessed seemed to bring a number of audience members of various ages to tears, which I suspect is due to the subtle way it plays upon the senses without using or prioritizing words, other than the initial song lyrics in Zulu.

When the sun appears half-risen against the back wall of the theater the procession of the animals in the kingdom seems to officially begin, and we see a cheetah enter. The cheetah's operator forms its feet and tail, while its puppet body protrudes out of him and is “walked” by the actor using thin rods. A group of zebras enter and trot across the stage, along with giraffes and a dancer wearing a flock of puppet birds as a headdress, whose wings move in synchronization with the operator's own feather-costumed arms.

Rafiki begins to sing the English lyrics of the song “Circle of Life,” as actors portraying elephants, rhinoceros and water birds enter. During this pageant, all the actor-animals entering through the house have to stop at the foot of the stage and wait in their queue until a rhythmic or visual signal allows them to proceed up the steps and into their places for the next choreographed moment. This choreographed pause in the traveling of the animals maintains the scene's tremendous blocking pattern, contributes to a sense of flowing movement, and helps the actors avoid crashing into one another with their often formidable costume pieces. At the performance I attended, my seat was in the first row nearest the stage steps on house left, so I had a special advantage of being able to carefully observe each of these actor-animals as they approached, then waited, then climbed up to the stage. The most disarming sight for me was the sight of the elephant, operated by at least two adult actors who supported what was the largest and, during the production I witnessed, the most crowd-pleasing puppet.

The elephant stopped right next to my seat and I realized that its tail was being supported and operated by a young African American girl, no older than six years of age by her looks. Her lips moved just so slightly and her eyes maintained a tremendous focus ahead of her: she was counting and listening for her signal to move forward. I imagined her concentration in performing her elephant's tail role to be a source of great pride; then I imagined a wider circle of attention around her, such as her parents and classmates who could well have been in the audience, and their pride in her; then I could imagine an even wider circle including all the black parents watching someone so young with such professionalism and dedication. These circles became overlapping as I imagined the pride of women, seeing a young girl so dedicated performing before them, and then the pride of parents of all races connecting to the moment because of her youth. In the midst of such spectacle something close to what is

meant by "universal," in the experience of pleasure across race, class, and gender lines, is perhaps accomplished.

Finally, the first chorus finishes, all the animals gather in a semi-circle, and the royal family enters on a platform at upstage center. The lights reveal King Mufasa, his wife Queen Sarabi, and in her arms the baby Simba—represented by a lion puppet-doll resting in the arms of the actor portraying Sarabi. Dancers portraying lionesses enter and do a sequence of leaps and jumps in which they land bent-kneed and balanced slightly forward at the waist, accenting this jump with sharp head turns to either side, suggesting the work they will do on the hunt. To emphasize the idea of the hunt, a second group of dancers with gazelle headdresses and armatures enter and dance in a circle, within which the lioness dancers crouch amongst them at stage center and observe them moving. Then the ensemble sings the final chorus and all the animals bow down before the royal family as Rafiki, having moved and now standing between Mufasa and Sarabi, holds the puppet baby lion aloft for all to admire. On the afternoon I watched the consistently rousing performance, "The Circle of Life" ended to extended applause. Just underneath the clapping I could hear the man seated behind me say, "That was f***ing awesome." I don't think I could have found a way to express that sentiment, which I shared, in critical, academic language any more effectively than he had in that moment.

The spectacle was meant to be enjoyed, but I do not think it is fair or critically thorough to dismiss the pleasure of *The Lion King* on Broadway as primarily seduction at the hands of a capitalist, racist, and sexist hegemony. For one thing, such a position erases agency and discernment, and assumes that any semiotic, critical reading is opposed to the pleasures of theatrical spectatorship. This is the position of Disney apologists, who argue that critiquing *The Lion King* is equivalent to defeating whatever pleasures, sensory and intellectual, can be

derived from it as a member of the audience. Taymor's innovations here, including her double event, are worth applauding, even if they raise additional critical questions about the nature of our society and its popular culture. *The Lion King* on Broadway will not end the presence of negative stereotypes in the theater since it traffics in some of them, but the show forces the audience to be in a more critical conversation with them, and perhaps amend them. Taymor's work should be acknowledged for its anti-racist and anti-sexist aims. Anti-racist work and Africanist performance practices continue to be central to the plot and ideological work of more recent Africa-focused Broadway musicals, like the post-colonial *Fela!*.

Chapter Four – Africa as a Summoning to Transracial Community: *Fela!* (2009)

Act One, Scene Three of *Fela!* begins when the shirtless, muscled, and male title character (played by actor Sahr Ngaujah) calls for two female members of the athletic, scantily-dressed dance ensemble to come out to the stage from the wings. The two women join Fela center stage, and standing on either side of him, they gyrate from their hips in a squatting position familiar in most forms of Africanist dance, with their wrists turning and spines undulating in a sensual, patriarchal display of the black racial exotic. The audience is then invited into the frame of the performance, and thus closer to the Africa represented there, when Fela calls the patrons to their feet. Fela announces that he will teach the Broadway audience how to move their hips and buttocks to simulate the "booty clock." In a setting traditionally kept dimly lit, the lights in the house rise at this moment, exposing the physical presence of the audience members to themselves and each other, and exposing, too, their emotional investments in this raced spectacle. Some audience members refuse to stand, others do so reluctantly, and many others have anticipated the invitation and dance in the tight spaces in front of their seats or shimmy expectantly along their seat rows toward the center aisles. This tensile call to transracial communal movement under an Africanist performance rubric nearly stops the show when it marks, through dance, the politics of the location of blackness.

I use "tensile" here to invoke an image of blackness as that quality of African diasporic identity, understood from any given subject position, that can withstand being stretched or extended without breaking. What I call "the tensile strength of blackness" was not only being tested through Broadway aesthetics in *Fela!* but in larger political, educational, media,

and cultural debates at the same historical moment. Senator Barack Obama campaigned for, and was subsequently elected to, the position of the first non-European American President of the United States, and this new turn in American social life in 2008-2009 subsequently framed the possibilities and readings of black male political power in practically all arenas of public discourse.[1]

A comparison study of President Obama's campaign and the Off-Broadway to Broadway ascendance of the *Fela!* show is tangential to this chapter. Nonetheless, it is useful to note that both this national moment of a black U.S. President and a Broadway celebration of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti as Nigeria's self-proclaimed "Black President" offered to audiences important, optimistic critiques of the location of blackness within a national identity. The presence of black male leadership in the highest and historically mostly-white realm of American politics, and the representation of black male leadership in one of the most lucrative and historically mostly-white American popular culture industries drew public attention to the ways that American national identity could or could not be truly racially hybrid.

In this chapter, I argue that the principle collaborators on *Fela!*, Bill T. Jones (choreographer/director), Jim Lewis (bookwriter), and producer Steve Hendel created an antiracist show which summons the audience to identify with *Fela!*'s vision of transracial community. Operating as both the medium for and the message of their summons is the rhythm of the performing bodies of the cast members, whose representations of blackness as

[1] In June, 2008 Barak Obama became the Democratic Nominee for the Presidential Race. *Fela!* debuted Off-Broadway that September and ran for roughly a month, closing in October, 2008. Obama won the race in November, 2008 and in January 2009 was officially sworn in as President of the United States. *Fela!* was transferred to a Broadway house, the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, and opened there in October 2009, near the end of President Obama's historic first year in office. Thus, the representations and questions attending an inspiring black male figure were at the center of national politics and were prominent in Broadway entertainment culture during the same 17 months.

improvisational and constructed allow the idea of blackness to serve as the vehicle for this wider, transracial understanding and experience. This new politics of relation is dependent on Africanist performance practices and on the three types of summons of improvisational identity, political alignment, and spiritual-moral leadership that, given in careful sequential order, form the ideological plot of the show. In imagining Nigerian postcolonial musician and activist Fela Kuti performing on a Broadway musical stage, Bill T. Jones and Jim Lewis ultimately ask us to look critically at the way we locate blackness and conceptualize our shared identity in community.[2]

Aimee Carrillo Rowe offers a theory of identity that responds to and is constitutive of community, and which is useful here in providing an academic parallel for the kinds of re-conceptualizing, politically imaginative work occurring in *Fela!* and in other Africa-focused Broadway musicals. Rowe is a scholar of rhetoric working from third world and antiracist feminist thought. In her important 2005 essay "Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation," she joins other feminist scholars like bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, and Chela Sandoval in responding to the traditional western conception of a self identity that is understood by the individual prior to their awareness of community belonging. For Rowe and her colleagues, any effective antiracist and progressive, decolonial work requires a political imagination that understands the self as an identity "radically inclined toward others" rather than as an abstract or detached, separate "I."[3] Rowe's particular contribution to

[2] A note on word choice in this chapter: When referring specifically to the historic and real Fela Kuti I will use arrangements of his name, all of which will include his formal surname, mentioning him as either "Kuti", "Fela Kuti," or "Fela Anikulapo-Kuti." Otherwise, the fictionalized and staged version of Kuti, played by the actor who originated the role, Sahr Ngaujah, will be referred throughout by the more familiar and informal "Fela."

[3] Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation," *NWSA Journal* 17(2, Summer): 15-46, (2005), 18.

this new politics of relation is in her argument for *belonging* as prior to an understanding of being and prior to an articulation of location, rather than as an effect of location.

A category of identity like race in this reformulation becomes a mode of belonging inclined toward others, and as such Rowe's work allows for the possibility of movement and transformation of the self out of and across an individual's various modes of belonging. Identities that were once understood as rigid "subject" positions anchored in location ("I am a black man;" "I am a Californian;" "I am a Christian") can instead be understood as relational and in motion, able to change. As a challenge to hegemonic power, Rowe's notions of belonging-derived location and the practice of what she calls "differential belonging" help us understand the specific antiracist function of *Fela!*, which hails the Broadway audience as a transracial, antiracist community, even as it deploys aspects of Africanist spectacle which potentially trace rather than erase lines of cultural difference. In other words, like Rowe's essay, *Fela!* is a text that suggests we can remain within our differentness from each other yet still become one another during our shared political work.

For many members of the Broadway audience, a positive response to being hailed as a transracial collective in wholly Africanist terms requires at best a flexible notion of black identity, since this call to collectivity happens in the midst of celebratory displays of Africanist performance and the particulars of Fela Kuti's black identity politics. The musical first meets this requirement through its continuous affirmation of blackness as a personal creation, malleable and responsive to the needs of the individual: blackness as an improvisational identity with tensile strength, subject to change and habitation by non-blacks while still remaining, somehow, black. This is evident in Act One in the scenes "B.I.D." and "Underground Spiritual Game," with its "booty clock" dance moment. While the signs of tribal Africa endure in the music and dance of these and other scenes, as well as

in the Africanist set and costume designs that support these elements, it is the notion of hybridity, especially a transatlantic one that does not exclude non-blacks from its embrace, which is emphasized even in the midst of Africanist performance displays. What we see Fela embrace as the true and meaningful understanding of his person is in fact an "essence" comprised of other various and shifting essences, and this hybrid black identity is then made legible through a political engagement with community and a moral commitment to lead by carrying one's social and psychic burdens. What is important to consider first is that what is "original" about identity in *Fela!* is not centered in a philosophically isolated sense of self nor in a culturally stereotypical African past, but is instead situated in the changing, socially-impacted present, which we all inhabit, regardless of our race.

The second way *Fela!* manages to hail the audience as a transracial community is by repeatedly testing the alignment of its title character to political values announced as comprising blackness. Once Jones and Lewis have demonstrated through the performances of Fela and his ensemble that identity is in some degree flexible and transformed by transnational or transcultural encounter in the first half of Act One, they proceed in the second half of Act One to show how this original identity is still lacking until it is brought into alignment with a freedom-seeking political perspective. Like the notion of improvisational identity, liberatory community practices can be transracial, and exist as such for many of *Fela!*'s ticket-buyers. Through the dances "Upside Down" and "Pipeline/I.T.T.," and in the silent scene "The Storming of Kalakuta," Jones and Lewis hail the audience as political beings aligned across race in liberatory sentiment.

The third way *Fela!* hails the audience as a collective is apparent in the way the musical's two black moral leaders, Fela and his mother Funmilayo, rearticulate an African diaspora commitment to community action as transracial commitment to community action.

In the song “Rain,” Yoruba spirituality is expressed by Funmilayo through the metaphysics of Africanist storytelling: the story she tells her son Fela offers him a solution, and as such her act of storytelling is a liberatory action and yet is also still made only of words. However, audience members who find themselves confused about or excluded from the cultural invitations of Funmilayo's song can embrace its larger lesson about perseverance in the face of difficulty. Like many a Broadway song, “Rain” begins in a culturally specific way but argues for a life-view and community-oriented actions that are embraceable across racial lines.

The transracial and transcultural sense of shared morality is made more explicit in “B.Y.O.C. (Bring Your Own Coffin),” the climactic dance of the musical. Fela's final instructions to his audience are to make public their individual struggles, which include but are not restricted to issues of race. As the musical's closing spectacle of naming, the dance suggests that there is a shared pain and moral outrage in all the issues we are divided by and carry as burdens. “B.Y.O.C.” hails the individual audience member as an individual who also belongs as member of a moral (black) community, and as a member of this enlarged, human community is also hailed as someone invested with the power to be a leader. The final major theatrical statement of the musical tests, through the living theory of dance practice, the “differential belonging” that Rowe theorizes is possible.

Like patrons of other Africa-focused Broadway musicals, the members of *Fela!*'s ticket-buying public experience the presence of Africanist performance practices in the show as a spectacle of pleasurable sonic and kinesthetic forms, but this aesthetic excitement can mask the complexity and politically-focused work of the show. *Fela!* is at every level a rhetorical show. The musical treats the life story of a Nigerian musician and activist who loved to toy with rhetoric. The structure of the two-act musical rests on the conceit that audience

members are entering Fela Kuti's historic nightclub, The Afrika Shrine. On this single, important night in the imagined past, Fela must decide whether to leave Nigeria or stay and remain the cultural icon and political firebrand that he will eventually be for that country. The realism of this conceit is aided by the choice to have Fela talk to the audience from the stage, as the real Kuti had done whenever he performed. Most of the text of the show is spoken by Fela in what is essentially an extended monologue addressed to the audience. This direct address hails the diverse but largely white audience into transracial community through its rhetorical nature and through Fela's additional requests to the audience for their physical participation at various times during the musical. Thus, the "summoning" of this chapter's title refers to the rhetorical structure of the musical's plot as well as to the ideological aims of its creators.

The sensational nature of Kuti's multiphase life story makes decisions about what to theatricalize from his life within a Broadway industry setting difficult. Should the focus center on his message and legacy? What about the contradictions he exhibited in his life, the problematic politics? Fela was an artist vocally opposed to western misappropriation of African artistry. What, then, is ethical about appropriating his music and life story for use in a Broadway musical, where tickets cost a hundred dollars and more—far outside what is affordable for most of the urban citizens in Lagos (or New York City) whom Kuti considered his "people"?

To unpack the meanings and difficulties of *Fela!*, I rely on careful observations of the production, made on-site at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in 2009. I conducted interviews with bookwriter Jim Lewis and two *Fela!* cast members, engaged in repeated listenings to the cast album, and conducted audience surveys during American broadcasts of the filmed London production of the show in 2010. The growing body of Fela Kuti scholarship, and of

dance historiography concerned with the work of Bill T. Jones, have provided further insights. In this chapter I will explain the way a summoning to transracial community is performed in *Fela!*, beginning in the following section with the way the audience encounters the show's ideological messages in the street and tracing that message up to the musical's opening number.

Welcome to the Afrika Shrine

The Broadway debut of *Fela!* offered its audiences a number of primary enticements. Foremost was the excitement of a new musical featuring new dance movement and soulful music never heard before on a Broadway musical stage. Some of the audience members had seen the Off-Broadway production or had heard about it (like myself) and were then eager to experience the show in its upgraded Broadway setting. Some audience members knew nothing about modern dance and were not familiar with Bill T. Jones, but were longtime fans of Fela Kuti and the genre of Afrobeat. Some audience members had not heard of Kuti but knew of Jones' importance as a choreographer-director, and many had seen his previous work on Broadway in the musical *Spring Awakening* (2006). Still others were drawn in from the street not by a general interest in original Broadway musicals, prior word-of-mouth, a love of the genre of Afrobeat, or previous knowledge of Kuti and Jones as historically important people, but primarily by the vibrant but dissected, touristic nature of *Fela!*'s poster advertisements. The series of images, featuring dancing and colorfully-dressed black bodies in thrusting, high-impact, sweaty movements, seemed to promise potential audience members a close encounter with a sensorial, essentialized, and rhythmic African blackness. In a comment posted on an online review website, one patron explained their reason for

purchasing a ticket to *Fela!*, saying, "I went to this simply because of a titillating and intriguing billboard I saw..."[4]

While poster images for *Fela!* certainly recycle the stereotypes of a primarily physical black essence that have circulated in American popular culture since the nineteenth century, the marketing and the show itself also trade in the various significations that Africa on the Broadway musical stage had acquired by the year 2009. Additionally, the design of the Broadway house and the for *Fela!* alternatively frames its audience members as tourists to an African place and as residents of an African community. Through this scenic manipulation of distance and presence, Marina Draghici's stage and house designs help her complicate Jones and Lewis' ambitious hailing process for the audience as a transracial community.

The significations of Africa on the Broadway musical theater stage have accumulated to such a degree that a patron's entrance into the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in 2009 to see *Fela!* is an entrance into a virtual arena of racial and class identity politics. First, Africa had already been established as a sign of valuable commodity in entertainment and fashion, and as a highly-visible tool for black economic advancement through *Sarafina!* and *The Lion King*. This commodification of Africa was evident during my first visit to see *Fela!* in October, 2009. I arrived a little more than an hour before the show began at 8:00pm, and shortly afterward a five-foot, standing, trunk-like cabinet or wardrobe on wheels was rolled outside from the theater to the sidewalk, bearing a *Fela!* poster taped outside of it and marked with a sticker reading "$15." After considering for a moment the best location for the trunk, the young woman attending the trunk locked its wheels and opened its two doors to reveal, much like a carnival barker might, five shelves of *Fela!* merchandise. There were tee-shirts

[4] Kyle B. (Las Vegas, NV), September 22, 2010, comment on Recommended Reviews for *Fela!*, "*Fela!*," *Yelp*, http://www.yelp.com/biz/fela-new-york (accessed May 26, 2014).

of various sizes and a hat, all printed with the *Fela!* musical logo. There were copies of Carlos Moore's biography on Kuti (*This Bitch of a Life*) and a CD by the band Antibalas, who provide the live music for the show and are credited on the show posters with providing the musical arrangements. There was a "greatest hits" CD of Kuti's music, featuring newly-added narration by Sahr Ngaujah, the actor originally playing the role of Fela Kuti. I appreciated that this merchandise display seemingly provided a direct economic benefit to so many people invested in the culture of the African diaspora: Kuti's family, Carlos Moore, the artists, craftspeople, and producers involved in the *Fela! p*roduction. I was attracted to the idea of owning some of these items, but was painfully aware of the 100 dollars I had spent on my ticket to see the show, the 400 dollars I had spent on my plane ticket to fly to New York to view and research the production, and the limited amount of money I had left to me to cover my food and meager lodgings at a hostel. The direct cultural and educational benefit the show provided me was enough to justify my own financial sacrifice. However, I was continually unsettled by the presence of merchandise I could not afford, at a show I could barely afford, all built on celebrating the life and art of a man publicly dedicated to addressing the needs of the poor in Nigeria—many of whom would never have the same resources, which were available to me, to make their own similar trips to New York City and to this culturally significant Broadway musical.

Second, Africa had been established as a sign for the diversity of African diaspora identities in shows like *In Dahomey* and *Kykunkor*, and this celebration of diasporic identity and space, through a manipulation of distance and presence, was evident in Draghici's conceptual design work on the lobby and house of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre. Upon entering the theater, patrons of *Fela!* are immersed in instrumental world beat music and a wash of colored lighting effects. Disco balls and other moveable lights set on pulsing and

rotating patterns gently swirl around the lobby and entrance to the house. The panels on the rows of doors leading to the house space from the lobby are painted in folk art designs depicting black farmers in a field, women carrying bundles down a dirt road, and other images of rural life in West Africa. A door painted to look like "Africa" can suggest, problematically, the ease of "stepping into" (and out of Africa). This is a touristic gesture but it is not only this. The transformation of the normally gilded and European-derived aesthetic of the doors and walls of the O'Neill through the act of painting or covering them with things meant to signify Africa is also a carnivalistic gesture, a masking gesture, and thus is also a transformative, powerful, and counter-hegemonic gesture.

Draghici's designed masking of the stage and house support the story of black empowerment and create around *Fela!*'s stage action a visual sense of pride in African diaspora identity. Corrugated metal sheets with spray-painted graffiti line parts of the balcony and back stage wall, suggesting an urban-scape and perhaps the tragedy of worldwide, darker-skinned poverty. The gold ornamentation and relief work in the O'Neill's architecture, which is normally seen in the balconies and around the entryways to the house, are now covered in African masks and hanging tribal designs that offer every patron an opportunity to clearly see one of these culturally marked artifacts. On the left side of the house are decorations suggesting the troubles of Africa. The banners on this side are more abstract, and the most prominent of these is a large map of the African continent, rendered as a geographic silhouette and surrounded by concentric rings, as though it were a target. The only location marked and identified on this map is the name "Lagos" printed in red letters. This decoration also signals Africa as a space of political trouble and social need, already established in the musicals *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!* as well as in western news reportage. The African map decoration is a diasporic symbol of power struggle. It also

conveys for its American audience a sense of touristic distance by emphasizing the exotically unfamiliar. In the case of *Fela!*, the abundance of Africanist sign-symbols and the environmental presence of corrugated metal sheeting, seen in many poor, darker-skinned communities worldwide but not visible within American media coverage of its own poorest communities, constitutes this sense of exotic unfamiliarity.

Draghici has also decorated the right-side wall of the house, near the edge of the proscenium arch, with the portraits of various famous African and African American leaders that include Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and by doing so emphasizes as a contrast the *familiarity* of these diasporic signs in relation to the Broadway audience, as well as their increased physical proximity. The shrine, for example, for pan-African figures who have contributed something important to the African diaspora, is mounted on a wall panel that is large (over six feet in height and width) and is placed by Draghici outside of the proscenium arch and inside the house itself, thus appearing within the ideological space of the audience. The design choice suggests that these cultural heroes have an impact or presence that extends beyond the figurative frame of the fictional story depicted onstage. The blurring of imagination and reality, and the purpose of such blurring, is suggested by the framing of this "wall of heroes" as a form of black diaspora-centered ancestor worship. Martin Luther, King, Jr. and other historical figures, including Kuti's mother Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, are surrounded with their own degrees of legend. This is further supported by the presence of readable, graffiti-like letters announcing the transformed theater space as "The Shrine," with names of various orishas in smaller letters around this larger place-name.[5] It is significant that while the signs of a culturally exotic Africa proliferate in the

[5] Orishas are powerful spirits or deities within Yoruba religious and spiritual traditions. Because Yoruba spiritual practice is not situated prominently in the American imagination, the sight of these evocative names of power potentially generates incoherency rather than connection and coherency for the audience. The visual incoherency of their appearance as part of the set design is to a degree minimized by the clearly American names of "Malcolm

O'Neill house and stage spaces, the signs of a culturally familiar black America, in the names Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., are also featured. X and King, Jr. are cultural heroes for many non-blacks as well as blacks, and their presence supports Jones and Lewis' larger request here for transracial community identification.

Draghici's design work circulates many of the signs of Africa that have been familiar to Broadway musical theater audiences for over a century, and that have been intentionally employed in anti-racist, Africa-focused musicals, and this work supports Jones and Lewis' ambitious hailing of the diverse Broadway audience as one transracial unity. This call for communal identification is evident in the carnivalesque way that *Fela!* actually begins, for the musical starts with a shared sense of music and dance, but without the rising of a show curtain, a blackout lighting cue, or most other typical boundary conventions used in Broadway musicals.

There is an active liquor bar set up at the back of the house with a working bartender, and nearby a deejay plays rhythmic worldbeat music that is being amplified throughout the house. Members of a band, whose instruments are visible on stage, enter and take up their instruments, and as a means of warming up the musicians begin to play a number of upbeat, danceable songs. As a result, a patron who enters encounters the signs of real life inside a nightclub. The houselights are not dimmed, so although some patrons enter and find their seats, others remain standing in the aisles, drinking or chatting with friends, just as they would in a real nightclub. The audience on the first night I attended appeared fairly diverse. While no young children were present, there were many college-aged people, many couples, and a number of elderly patrons. The audience seemed evenly divided among men and women and among black and non-black, mostly European-American patrons, and everyone seemed to enjoy the environment that Draghici has helped Hendel, Lewis, and Jones create.

X" and "Martin Luther King, Jr."

If there is any noticeable signal to the audience that this environmental performance is beginning, it is most likely the moment when a stylishly dressed black man comes down the aisle and begins to draw attention to himself by looking at the patrons in the house in an intense, somewhat stylized manner. On the night I first attended this cast member stood near my own seat in the fourth row from the stage. It is not immediately clear if he is looking for another person before taking his seat, or if he is, in fact, a cast member of the show, but on the night I attended his gestures caused me and other patrons to look over at him. Shortly after he begins his stylized looking, other patrons take their seats and shift their attention to the aisles as well, possibly alerted by the growing focus on that part of the house. After scanning the house for a moment, this stylish man comes up on the stage. The bass player in the band begins to play a solo line, and the signature of the line identifies it as the beginning of Fela Kuti's song "Everything Scatter." As the bass riff repeats and the band members build the song, a number of women (I count eleven of them) dance on the sides of the stage for a moment before entering. *Fela!* begins with its fictional story emerging out of the brief but real, nightclub-styled interactions the audience members have had available to them for the past fifteen minutes. As the dancing women begin to sing "oohs," the lights change and the house lights dim in the more conventional tradition of signaling the start of a performance.

Four bent-over male dancers, with a standing male walking between them, enter from the back of the house and move toward the stage. The dancers are also stylishly dressed, though not as flashy as the man they surround, who in his blue and white jumpsuit appears to be the figure of Fela Kuti himself. The dancers move with heads down and backs almost flat, and as they walk in steps measured to the band's rhythm they keep their arms hanging beneath their shoulders, their hands balled. Some of the dancers move their shoulders or

elbows sharply to the rhythm. Sahr Ngaujah, as Fela, walks with two dancers before him and two following him. The non-natural, bent-over posture and rhythmic drive of the arm and shoulder movements that Jones has choreographed for the four escorts cleverly suggests the pistons of a motor vehicle, and the group of four dancers appear to "carry" Fela to the stage as though he were in a living motorcade, fitting for a black president. The clever fun of the choreography provokes some audiences members to laughter as the male dancers and Fela enter and take the stage. Fela grabs a microphone once he is on stage, explains that "We are here for your enjoyment and our own enjoyment," and before he sings the first lines of the musical's opening number, "Everything Scatter," he concludes the unconventional preamble to the show by saying, "Welcome to the Shrine."

I have mentioned two of the major ways that Africa has been previously used as a sign in Broadway musicals and that also operate heavily in *Fela!*: as a sign of global commodification and as a sign of the African Diaspora's diversity. A third major signification of Africa on the Broadway musical stage is that of Africa as a sign of transracial community possibility, established in the message and tremendous popularity of *Lost in the Stars* and *Sarafina!* and in the worldwide embrace and economic dominance of *The Lion King*. In *Fela!*, however, unlike any Broadway musical before it, Africa as site or source of transracial community is not merely an element of the show but is essential to its message to the Broadway audience, is key to its ideological architecture, and is the musical's central communicative problem.

Hendel, Lewis, and Jones attempt to solve this problem by a careful ideological layering. On the one hand, they let the lyrics and speech of their Fela character tell a story about black empowerment and the role of the artist in protesting state injustice. In "Everything Scatter," for example, this first song of Act One finds Fela singing about "This story I want to tell

you, a story 'bout how things are." The story his lyrics tell is of an incident where a busload of citizens are arrested, presumably for nothing more than being "Fela people" and for defending themselves verbally against verbal attack. The original song itself is a political analogy, wherein the forward-moving bus represents the Nigerian nation, and the chaos of divergent views within it represents the upheaval Fela Kuti's cultural presence causes for the Nigerian people.

On the other hand, Jones and Lewis arrange the show's elements in such a way that *Fela!* also tells another story, one in which each member of the audience, regardless of their racial affiliation or degree of racial awareness, is welcomed, invited, admonished, made to bear witness, and ultimately asked to embrace their belonging in a moral, African diaspora-led community. These two different approaches to story are blended in the ideological economy of Africanist performance. Songs and dances allow *Fela!* to remain "black" in terms of their display of racially marked cultural forms, while Fela's invitation for audience participation, regardless of the race of the audience, allows *Fela!* to become a communal experience.

As Act One begins Fela declares, "Everybody say 'ye ye'," and the actor points the microphone out to the audience to hear a response. This response is first only made by a few members of the audience, possibly only those who understand immediately this culturally marked call-and-response instruction. Fela makes a disapproving face, and the ensemble members who are all watching him echo this judgment with their own frowns or head-shaking. Fela again speaks to the audience. It is clear the creators of the show are instructing the audience, through Fela's direct address, about the nature of the musical they are there to be spectators for: a musical in which they have to be more than just spectators who watch, but who—in addition to watching—have *to be spectators who also actively participate*

when called on to do so. What summons them to participate, and when or how this summons is made, becomes a larger point of the show, as the musical repeatedly calls the multiracial audience to locate and accept their own belonging in the Africa being represented.

Africa as an Articulation of Improvisational, "Original" Identity

The first half of Act One consists of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's artistic journey, and this journey is most efficiently summarized in the scene called "BID (Breaking it Down)," in which Fela describes his own development from a musical prodigy who easily absorbed a range of global musical influences to an iconoclastic artist forging and naming his own musical idioms. Fela describes in chronological order each of the musical elements that have served as significant influences in his creation of Afrobeat music. Each descriptive moment is elaborated on through musical passages relating to it and through brief but evocative choreographic gestures.

"BID (Breaking it Down)" begins with Fela explaining that his grandfather was a Christian priest whose church music was an important initial influence. As he speaks the ensemble of male and female dancers gather on stage in choral formation and sing a short passage of a traditional-sounding hymn. Next comes the introduction of highlife music, and the music and dance vocabularies on display blend swing and jazz elements with more stylized African ones. The dancers break out into heterosexual couplings, for example, and perform various swing and jive dance lifts and bent-knee steps as the band plays a jazz-syncopated melody. The audience is told how Fela gained his first audiences playing the then-popular highlife jazz, but a desire to grow as an artist and to see the world leads him to London, where he studies music formally in school, listens to the music of Frank Sinatra, and forms his own jazz band before finally returning to Lagos to play his original jazz. Fela discovers that West Africa was now interested in funk and the music of James Brown. He

explains that in order to compete in the music scene he had returned to, he had to create an even newer sound—one that could incorporate the best of Brown's funk but still allow his African originality to be heard within it as well. The various musical elements that Kuti embraces to make what he calls "Afrobeat" music are not bound by racial limits and are able to flow across cultural boundaries that live bodies and other parts of human identity cannot freely travel. This blending of non-Nigerian influences helps Kuti develop his cosmopolitan identity and serves as a model for a transnational or hybrid identity that moves freely, just as his external cultural influences have freely moved across their originating borders. Once he is equipped with a mature and original sound, Fela ends his autobiographical summary with a call for audience participation in the "booty clock," described briefly at the start of this chapter and worth some extended consideration here.

The band introduces a new sound, and Fela reminds the audience that the guitar, bass and drum riff they are now hearing is different from the examples they have just heard. This new music is the product of Fela's transcultural explorations—it is his Afrobeat. He formally introduces this third scene of Act One: "Now here is where we play what we call the "Underground Spiritual Game," but in order for you to play with us, you have to stand up now. Now is the time. Welcome na de Shrine."[6] Fela gestures with his outstretched arm to the audience, and the dancers on stage echo this gesture, encouraging the audience to stand up from their seats. Once it appears that a large group of audience members have chosen to stand, Fela continues with his instruction: "We are all standing now. And now we go...undergound."[7] On cue with the word "underground," Fela and the dancers sink into a crouched position. Thus, the dance references sexual behavior through this crouched position, and it references the possibility of vice and the shadow of polite society in its

[6] *Fela!* Field notes, October 2009.

[7] Ibid.

juxtaposition with the word “underground.” Fela faces the audience while on either side of him, his two female assistants face upstage with their backsides to the audience. Fela gestures to the area surrounding his waist, hips, booty, and genitalia and says, “Here is a clock.” He proceeds to call out different times, and as he does this he and the dancers demonstrate the way each hour of the clock corresponds to a different direction for the movement of the pelvis. Fela asks the audience to imagine each person as though they stood at the center of a clock. The hour of “three” and “nine,” for example, would translate into a sharp hip isolation to the direct left and right, while the hours of “six” and “twelve” would refer to pelvic thrusts directly forward and back. Fela demonstrates his choreographic language with the dancers and then with the audience joining in, and calls out his hour-instructions in rhythm with the band's music.

The pose each dancer maintains for “The Clock” is captured in one of the promotional posters of the show (Figure 2). The choreography focuses audience attention on the buttocks, as the dancers do not travel but primarily stand in a crouched position and thrust their buttocks in rhythm back and forth at the edge of the stage. Even though all three dance this section together, the two women, butts facing the audience, are more significantly on physical display for the audience. This seemingly greater emphasis on the sexualized bodies of women over those of men, who are part of the on-stage dancing ensemble but in visibly lower numbers compared to the women, underpins one of the critiques about the musical and its use of the black female body.

Other readings of the moment seem more convincing. The notion that the booty clock dance is primarily about sexual politics becomes unstable, for example, when we consider that some audience members regard it not as an affirmation or exploitation of the black sexual body but of the black body's essentialized “soul”—a primarily racial rather than a

Figure 2. A typical *Fela!* poster on a New York City street. The cast member pictured here is performing a squat familiar to practitioners and observers of Africanist dance. This pose, in which the booty is presented to the viewer, is the starting position from which various hip and butt isolations are performed within the musical's "booty clock" dance. This image obscures the female dancer's face, presenting her body as an object of observation since her ability to return the viewer's gaze is not enabled here. While the design of the poster is visually striking and arguably quite attractive, the dancer's facelessness and the display of her flesh in the image resonates uncomfortably with the larger dual histories of black and female oppressions. Photo by the author.

sexual affirmation. And yet the notion that the moment is exclusively a black one also becomes unstable when we consider that the invitation to participate is always given to the entire, racially diverse audience, and not just to female members or to those patrons assumed to be connected to or invested in a black cultural identity.

Audience members identifying themselves as distant spectators—either due to class, education, culture or race are encouraged momentarily to embrace the awkwardness and embarrassment that can attend Otherness, since average audience members, not trained in dance as the cast members are, can become unruly, unsightly bodies, all of whom must then be trained into aesthetic (and, in this case, Africanist) beauty. This moment of being the awkward Other needs to occur before their communal participation in the dance can transform "them" into "us." And on some level, participating in the action of the booty clock dance arguably gives some audience members a shared sense, however small, of having endured something, metaphorically aligning them with the long-suffering characters they are witnessing on stage.

Audience members who imagine themselves in a closer relationship to blackness through this public dance moment are encouraged through the spectacle of the plot interruption to celebrate their insider status in front of the Others assembled there, and to join the creators in their flaunting of late twentieth-century Broadway convention. There are many possible audience responses to this moment, from joy to frustration at being Othered in the presence of Africanist dance teachers. Some may feel frustration with the moment's celebration of cultural subversion, in the sense that the Broadway house space itself is being Othered or transformed. In other words, just as Fela's mother Funmilayo sings "It's our country now," the booty clock dance might seem to announce, "It's our Broadway now." I am not arguing that these responses are either singularly occurring or mutually exclusive

within an individual, only that a particular member of the audience can self-identify as part of this "our" prior to the dance, or feel invited to be part of this "our" during the dance.

Rowe identifies the transformative potential in this participatory dance moment of belonging, when she asserts that belonging is "that movement in the direction of the other: bodies in motion, encountering their own transition, their potential to vary."[8] For many audience members, the act of dancing in a way they might not have been used to was an encounter with their own transition, from one body (and identity and location) to another. Rowe suggests that identity is a mode, a performance of relation. Therefore, the act of performing a counterhegemonic affiliation through the racialized booty clock dance in *Fela!* is an act of responding to the direct and indirect hailing of the moment, and embracing momentarily—and through the energy and risk of improvisation—another identity.

In the space between each return of the repeating musical riff, the dancers improvise their own movements. The obviously choreographed, synchronized moments of "The Clock" dance become punctuation marks for what is actually a series of longer dance sentences composed of improvisation. Fela's words draw the audience attention to the booty and its ability to "keep time" in this scene, and this attention is accented by the work of the band and by the dance moves of the females on stage. However, the larger, indirect message here is about improvisation, and this message is made more direct once the clock dance ends.

Fela next calls on the audience to join him in a moment of participatory singing:

> Now it is time for originality. No matter where you are—at work, at school, in de street, in da club. Find your own groove. Do your own thing. And now, you will repeat after me, now: o-ri-gi-nal, no ar-ti-fi-ci-al-i-ty! Your turn![9]

[8] Rowe, 27.

[9] Ibid.

The refrain “Originality, No Artificiality” is repeated a number of times, and the words are projected in rhythm and in the same separated syllable form as the melody, allowing audience members to quickly learn the phrase as well as the unique way Fela asks the audience to say it. There is irony in the fact that the audience is being asked to think about what is original within the context of a sung group drill, led by an authoritative figure. Despite this oddness, the moment is clever for conveying the essence of Fela's artistic philosophy at this stage in his life while also providing the audience a way to simply but physically share in his philosophical moment. While the audience chants with Fela and his cast, the dancers in the ensemble travel behind him around the stage, doing various African dance movements and their own interpretive gestures, all to their own timings and with their own facings. As with “The Clock,” the larger statement remains one about improvisation, and the rhetorical demand in the shared, sung lyric that the audience be “original” supports this belief in the power and purpose of improvisation. One of the dancers brings Fela a saxophone to play, and Fela tells the audience they can congratulate themselves for dancing well. He directs the audience to return to their seats, and proceeds to join the band with some energetic horn playing while the rest of the ensemble improvises a series of competitive and virtuosic African dances.

By showing the audience the constructed nature of Kuti's otherwise “African” originality, *Fela!* demonstrates the process of history-making and the constructedness of identity. This work also reveals the social limit of identity as a construction, for while Fela affirms an essential Africanness throughout the show by his spoken text, the “B.I.D. (Breaking It Down)” and “ Underground Spiritual Game (The Clock)” scenes actually reveal the importance of shared cultural contributions not bound by race or nationality. This enactment of cultural construction works against textual ideas of essential identity and is

therefore useful in critical race-theorizing. Fela's demonstration of identity-making counters the destructive effects of racialized storytelling which locate identities within fixed essences. All of the Africa-focused shows discussed in this dissertation celebrate the aesthetic pleasures of Africanist performance practices in some manner, but unlike those other shows *Fela!* makes explicit for the audience the individual choice and cultural borrowing that mediate these practices.

Africa as an Alignment with Political Community

During the first half of Act One the Broadway audience is first imagined as patron-tourists of an African cultural underground, with Fela as a guide. Although the speech and song in the first few scenes hails audiences members as people who belong here in The Afrika Shrine, the need for narrative clarity and the conceit of Fela's storytelling during this concert lead him to describe and explain things a true insider might reasonably already know. The presence of explanatory narration suggests the possible cultural or racial differentness of individuals listening in, while the repeated invitations to participate during the musical declare that this difference is not tangible enough to separate people willing to work together for social justice. Through the second half of Act One, Fela travels to America, becoming a cultural tourist in his own way. His tour of America changes him and politicizes him, and this transnational and transcultural boundary crossing is one of the ways Fela models the kind of transracial connection in the audience that the musical anticipates and gestures toward.

Fela tells the audience that "I fell in love with Afro-America and African American sistahs," and the line serves as a musical cue for Act One, Scene Five ("Black President") and its romantic duet that the character Sandra and Fela sing together. Sandra enters the stage from the top of a white platform with a single, steep staircase descending to the floor.

She sings the song “Lover,” which Fela joins after she has completed her first verse, and during her performance she descends the stairs, advancing slowly down into the stage space Fela occupies, and accents important words in the lyrics with hand and arm gestures. The line “Set my world on fire,” for example, is sung with a bent arm, with Sandra's balled fist raised near her head in a symbol of black power. Other dancers follow her down the stairs and echo her gestures with their versions of the same ones, like a silent chorus. “I'll show you the way” is sung with two hands, palms facing inward, held in parallel at chest height and moved straight out from the body into forward space, as if Sandra and her chorus of women were tracing the direction of a corridor or road. The two flirt and then fight, as it becomes apparent that Fela holds many assumptions about blackness, politics, and women—all of which Sandra is determined to challenge:

FELA: You black people in America-o. You have it all upside down. You act like this black power business draws inspiration from Africa.

SANDRA: Of course it does!

FELA: In Nigeria we are ashamed to go around in national dress.

SANDRA: Fela, that's just it! Africa to America, America to Africa! We've got a lot to learn from each other.”[10]

Fela's transnational and transcultural encounter through Sandra reveals the way his improvisational identity is not enough. It is Fela who has his understanding “upside down,” but his alignment with the politicized Sandra reverses that and suggests a similar possible change for the audience.

[10] Ibid. In the various productions of *Fela!* I have seen, the exact dialogue between Fela and Sandra has varied. “We have a lot to learn from each other,” for example, has been given as “Now we are learning from each other.” This suggests that some degree of improvisation is present in the dialogue as well. However, in all versions of the show the line “Africa to America, America to Africa” has remained, as well as the basic structure of a perspectival fight and reconciliation between Sandra and Fela.

As the scene ends and Fela and Sandra seem to fall into a comfortable friendship, the ensemble enters for the beginning of the song "Upside Down." Fela takes a seat on the stage, reading a copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Each dancer carries books, and as they march and circle the stage, visual images of the original book jackets and enlargements of their texts and words are projected onto the back wall.

The choreography of "Upside Down" has a military quality to it, with the dancers marching and walking, in stiff single file, in various patterns around the stage and carrying books with them. Fela's continual narration within the show and his emphasis on the influence his American visit had on his life could suggest for some audience members the problematic idea of paternalism on the part of African America. Yet, as with a number of other places in the musical, there is a semiotic split between what the musical is saying directly through its dialogue and what it is saying indirectly and more symbolically through Jones's use of music and dance choreography. It is no coincidence that the first connection Fela makes within the plot, between the plight of others and his own agency as artist and spectator of suffering, involves the struggling black body in the United States. This struggling black body is figured in the presence of Sandra and the concerns she expresses. Sandra's transition from female lover to teacher makes her role in Kuti's story clear: This musical is not a typical, late 20th century book-style romance. Instead, *Fela!* is about making connections.

As Fela reads from his book while Sandra sings, he has a revelation. Jones spotlights this mental shift with a parade of various connections, including projected texts and the multiplying of bodies reading from books. As if to emphasize this point, images of burning buildings are projected onto the wall above the circling ensemble with their books in hand. The burning points to frustration and acts of violence, but with a purpose: to free the people

from old constructs like cultural imperialism and colonialism. Through Jones' dance choreography these circulating bodies represent the act of reading, the process of transcultural encounter, and the power of both to bring positive social and political transformation.

Newly politicized, Fela explains how his public critique of Nigerian government landed him in jail as he sings the humorous "Expensive Shit." This experience only makes him more eager to fight the injustices of his nation, and he follows that moment with the song "Pipeline/I.T.T."—a bold, name-calling critique of the international government corruption of Nigerian resources and public trust. Fela pledges to redouble his efforts and challenges the audience to do the same, saying "Let us wage political war on our leaders...let music be the weapon," and ending Act One with his upraised fist in a gesture of defiance and power.

The most difficult moment of the show is the Act Two, Scene Four sequence called "The Storming of Kalakuta," which depicts the events and aftermath of an infamous raid by police and soldiers on the communal, pot-infused compound where Fela Kuti had set himself up as a self-proclaimed "Chief Priest." In the musical, Fela's honeymoon-ish, harem-like vision of life at the Kalakuta compound is suddenly interrupted by loud drum beats, yelling, and flashing lights. Ensemble members scatter while images of flames and groups of people running are projected across the backstage wall screens. The armed men visit upon all the residents a terrifying degree of violence.

Suddenly all movement on the stage comes to a halt and the lights dim. Various hospital images and arrest photos of the ensemble members are projected in the darkness. As spotlights illuminate and then darken on various queens posed on stage, the actual testimonies of the real-life women they represent are projected against the dark, backstage wall above them in white letters. While some of the projected photos are of the ensemble

men, most of the photos and testimonies are those of the queens, whose words describe terrible acts of humiliation, rape, and torture committed against them by the armed government soldiers who stormed Kuti's Kalakuta compound and set it on fire. The sequence of images and testimonies play out in silence, as each individual female dancer represents her experience only by standing in silence within the spotlight as audience members try to read her words that are projected above her. The last testimony in the string of atrocities is a story about Kuti's beloved mother Funmilayo and how she died because of complications from injuries she sustained after soldiers threw her from a 2nd story window during that raid. The raid/rape moment ends as Funmilayo's wail is heard, while the members of the ensemble are seen staggering off the stage in the dimming light.

The audience is lured into the theater through marketing which seems to promise a celebratory display of exposed and highly energetic black female flesh, and much of the musical up until the moment of the "Kalakuta" raid scene delivers on that promise. However, the Testimony/raid scene is intentionally uncomfortable. Lewis and Jones' choice to display witness statements on screens forces the audience to read the statements in the silence created for that moment. The presence of written testimony requires a level of critical engagement from each audience member—a level that might not appear as noticeable during the more celebratory moments of watching Africanist movement and listening to Afrobeat music. The largely silent scene emphasizes the risk that comes with political alignment. The conventional, celebratory nature of the Broadway musical is pushed to its somber, tragic-feeling limit as audience members are shown a serious problem that at this point in the musical's second act is not given a song and dance solution. Fela is unable to find recourse through the Nigerian justice system, since the perpetrators of the violence

were members of the police and military forces, and as a result is feeling understandably defeated physically and spiritually. We don't blame him for wanting to leave Nigeria behind.

Africa as a Commitment to Spiritual-Moral Leadership

At this climax near the end of Act Two (Scene Five, "Dance of the Orisas"), Fela undergoes a spirit journey to the land of the Orisa. There, after an evocative encounter with his dead mother Funmilayo, he returns to the nightclub and finishes the show. Now, however, Fela stands before the audience with a new, fearless sense of political engagement that he invites the audience to share, as he simultaneously commemorates his mother's example and sets one for the audience. He does this in a funeral procession that is also a public protest within the closing scene of the musical, called "B.Y.O.C. (Bring Your Own Coffin)." If the plot movement of Act One can be summarized as Fela's quest to clarify the story of his life and art for the audience, and to deepen and politicize this story through his own process of storytelling, then the plot movement of Act Two can be summarized as Fela's quest to renew or fully commit to his sense of purpose as a community storyteller. Put another way, Fela comes to realize in Act One that "music is a weapon," but after suffering tremendous abuses and losses at the hands of government officials, decides in Act Two that such terrorism will not dissuade him from using this weapon for the benefit of Nigeria's poor, and will not scare him (and by extension his Broadway audience) away from using art and cultural expression in the service of larger social-political change. While black women are instrumental for Fela's discovery of and commitment to the possibilities of political action, black women also serve the plot as embodiments of the spiritual world, and their presence is the guidance Fela needs to secure his commitment to action. The notion of black spiritual practice as real, effective action in the face of global political struggle is suggested

in Act Two's "Rain" song and in the funeral that serves as the musical's finale and closing ideological statement.

Distraught after the brutal beatings and loss of property he and his friends have suffered, and defeated in the midst of grieving for his mother, Fela calls on his ancestors, dons face paint, and embarks on a journey to the spirit world. Two veil-like curtains drop down from the proscenium and various *egungun* dancers—masked spirit figures—enter on the stage from behind this veil.[11] Images of electricity are projected onto the curtain, the white raffia-skirted figures dance around Fela as the curtains lift. Funmilayo's entrance in a pose at the top of a moveable platform that egungun dancers bring on stage marks the audience's journey with Fela into the spirit world.

Funmilayo is brought to the stage on the same platform structure on which Sandra had made her entrance, only this time the lights accent its white color and Funmilayo is seated at the top of the platform. She looks like a brighter version of her portrait, wearing her eyeglasses and gold earrings but now dressed in a bright white dress with a lace-patterned shawl and a matching, white *gele* head wrap. All the costumes, including Fela's and those worn by the *egunguns*, are rendered in the same, bright, white, glow-in-the-dark fabric, which gives the scene its appropriately supernatural but energized feeling. Funmilayo, at the height of the platform and positioned in the highest visible playing space in the scene, comes to represent the spiritual destination for Fela—a higher plane of peace and enlightenment. After a few moments of struggle in trying to reach her, Fela is seen at her feet. He rests his thigh and right hip on the top step immediately beneath her feet, his legs stretched slightly

[11] Henry John Drewel offers a basic definition of the *egungun* ("bone") figure as a masked figure representing and in some cases embodying the spirit from the dead, whether that spirit is a deity or a human ancestor. The *egungun* is an entity whose supernatural identity is concealed in the figure of a man, and this figure is often featured at Yoruba rituals. See: Henry John Drewel, "The Arts of Egungun among Yoruba Peoples," *African Arts* No.11(3): 18-98 (1978), 18.

below him and his feet resting on a lower step. He looks up at Funmilayo, his head at the height of her lap, in a pose of adoration as she sings to him.

Having ascended and reached his mother in the spirit world, Fela waits at her feet while Funmilayo sings the virtuosic and octave-scaling solo “Rain.” The lyrics of the song tell the story of the Yoruba hero Obalogun and how he defeated the harmful demons of the world. “Rain” is marked by the idea of black spiritual practice. This is evident not just by the fact that Funmilayo, as the main spiritual figure in the musical, is the one singing it, but also because her performance of the song includes improvisatory vocal runs, growls, and melismas familiar in gospel and other Africanist music forms. Five of the egungun dancers sit on the floor near the base of the platform and provide sound effects and choral responses to Funmilayo's story. As the song ends, Funmilayo stands, visually emphasizing the growing range and power of the closing melody lines. Fela slowly backs down the staircase to the stage floor, as the egungun move into position behind the platform structure. On Funmilayo's final high note the platform is moved offstage, as the light around her shrinks to a fading spotlight on her face. Likewise, the light around Fela shrinks to a single spotlight on the floor where he stands. He has returned to our moment with him at the Shrine.

Whether an audience member decides to view Fela's spirit journey as a fevered dream or as a legitimate, out-of-body or other-worldly experience, Lewis and Jones highlight the spirit journey by making it a turning point in Fela's character development. After being urged by his mother to not be afraid in the face of trouble, Fela returns to the world of the play and our shared Lagos nightclub moment as a renewed man. The implication is that Fela can now fully embrace his iconic status of cultural-political hero in our contemporary, global culture, and that this status is metaphorically like the prestige that the legendary hero Obalogun retains in Yoruba culture. With his politicized, artistic ambitions firmly grounded in a

spiritual-moral commitment to community, Fela announces that despite government oppression and threat of death, he and his band will stay in Lagos after all.

At this point (having returned from the spirit world renewed), Fela asks the audience, "Whose coffin will you carry?" and with the speaking of that line the lights in the house rise slightly as the ensemble enters through the house and moves toward the stage, just as they had done at the beginning of the show. Only this time, each of them carries a small, stylized coffin, while images of a procession of coffins are projected on the backstage wall, multiplying them and thus multiplying the sense of depth and breadth in this symbolic procession. Many of the small coffins have messages painted on them. One coffin, for example, has the phrase "Stop HIV" written above the image of an AIDS ribbon. As each dancer comes on stage, that person sits the coffin down in a center-stage pile. Eventually the back wall opens up, revealing many more coffins stacked high up to the ceiling. Fela and the ensemble sing the closing song, "Coffin," as the show comes to an end.

The "Coffin" song and funeral procession scene seem to ask, literally, "What do you carry?" The suggestion is that each one of the members of the audience is "infected" with one type of problem or another, in a sense that is both figurative and literal. The semiotic message is that we all have the power to choose, disclose, reveal, or name the contagious social or psychic ills we carry or support. We have the power to bury these ills by first making them known as things that plague us. Lewis and Jones seem to be saying in *Fela!* that our interactions with each other as global citizens are inevitable. We cannot stay "sealed off" from trouble as Fela had originally tried to be during his Act One aloofness or in his initial decision to leave the Shrine and Nigeria. The musical affirms that we already influence each others' lives. Commitment to each other emerges as the over-arching theme,

despite forces that aim to distort our view of each other and obscure the ways we are inherently connected.

My reading of the musical aims to address, to a partial degree, the lack of direct commentary in the musical about Fela Kuti's HIV status, his eventual death from AIDS-related illness, and the HIV status of director-choreographer Bill T. Jones. The fact that the real-life Kuti denied the existence of AIDS or his own infection with HIV while also being sexually active makes any popular treatment of Kuti's sexual politics a challenge. My sense is that Jones does not want to comment on the HIV/AIDS issue in a way that further ghettoizes himself or others who struggle with HIV. In dealing with the specter of AIDS by rendering it, and our responses to it, as a larger metaphor, Lewis and Jones are able to make a political statement through musical theater form that broadens rather than narrows that discussion, and includes the full range of his audience members.

The musical's summoning of the audience to transracial community is an intimate and delicate challenge for patrons to accept: ticket-buyers must decide whether or not to join the actor representing Fela in playing with frames of power (the spectator-actor relationship, the patron-performer relationship) while also committing to two and a half hours of political expression that is often polemical, occasionally profane, and trenchantly critical of power. Being a musical, this commitment is sought right away through the use of spectacle in the musical number. But the spectacle in *Fela!* gives way, as the show progresses, to questions of visibility, distance, and agency, further troubled by its dependence on the performing bodies of black women. *Fela!* is an uncomfortable show by traditional Broadway musical standards, and the public expression of this discomfort is most visible in Isherwood's review of the show for *The New York Times*.

The Isherwood Affair: Reviewing 'Fela!'

On January 31, 2010, three months into *Fela!*'s successful arrival on Broadway but four months before the official date for the all-important Tony Award nominations, the *New York Times* theater critic Charles Isherwood published his review of *Fela!* entitled "Feeling Unsettled at a Feel-Good Show," saying,

> As much as I enjoyed the show, directed and choreographed by Bill T. Jones, it left me with lingering questions about the depiction of the African milieu it evoked. In short, the emphasis in *Fela!* on the spectacle of African culture tilted the show a little too closely toward minstrelsy. It evoked an unsettling feeling I can't say I've ever had before at the theater.[12]

The bulk of Isherwood's frustrated response to *Fela!* expressed a concern about the spectacular display of the black female body and, as the quote shows, a concern about the interpretive dangers of staging what Isherwood elsewhere called "a Disneyland version of Africa."[13] His long and biting review was responded to in over one hundred passionate readers' comments on the *Times* web page where the article was posted, with some readers giving almost line-by-line critical readings of Isherwood's article. The responses varied widely. Some readers were supportive of Isherwood's opinion. Commenter #5, for example, called the review an "excellent attempt at some of the most difficult kind of criticism."[14] Others viewed Isherwood's comments exclusively in racial terms, and saw Isherwood's problematic invocation of "minstrelsy" as evidence of Isherwood's cultural insensitivity. Commenter #13 asked, "Does white guilt know no bounds?"[15]

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[12] Christopher Isherwood, "Feeling Unsettled at a Feel-Good Show," *New York Times* (New York, 2010).

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

Isherwood's comments ignore the fact that the stage picture and conceit for the entire show is that we are watching a nightclub performance—a conceit announced in the opening dialogue of the show—and so Isherwood makes the mistake of equating this staged scene of a historical and specific performance with an attempt by Lewis and Jones to depict everyday life in Nigeria. Also underlying Isherwood's comments are two de facto assumptions that are inherently faulty. The first is that there is an "authentic" and unified African culture that can be spoken of and against which *Fela!*'s vision of culture can be measured. Isherwood suggests that there is a more authentic way to present Africa on stage, but as some of his readers wisely point out, he does not clarify what such stage pictures would or should actually look like. The second assumption he makes is that the commercialism surrounding *Fela!* on Broadway is somehow different in tone or nature from other Broadway shows. However, it would not be fair to say the show was free of certain presentations of negative black stereotype. Most of the cast members in *Fela!* are black female dancers, and their presence in a show without much dialogue seems to affirm what Isherwood calls, in his attack on the representation of black women in the musical, "the presentation of African culture as a feast of exotic pageantry."[16]

While most of the readers defended *FELA!*, few of the responders engaged with Isherwood's larger and valid, if poorly worded, questions about the meaning and purpose of audience discomfort, the use of the black female body on stage, and the fact that this "presentation of African culture" in a post-colonial musical would have likely been ignored outright by the Broadway industry if it were not for the problematic labors and attractions of *Fela!*'s sexy and highly marketable dancing women. Isherwood's admission that the show caused him great discomfort was a wonderful starting point for critical discussion, and the

[16] Ibid.

controversy his review created (republished subsequently on many websites, including ones in Nigeria) might possibly have increased ticket sales to the show in its own way.[17]

In its modeling of new modes of social belonging, *Fela*!'s emphasis on moral leadership is inherently connected to the issue of accountability, especially since the lack of accountability by Nigeria's leaders is a constant theme of the show's lyrics. However, Jones and Lewis create a musical constructed with silences around women, which seems to contradict its larger aims. The musical relies on the labor of the black female performing body. From its marketing to its displays of Africanist performance practice to its plot movement, it is black women in *Fela!* who structure and occupy the center of the lived space. The show is called *Fela!*, for example, but the majority of media-marketing images feature a face-obscured, female dancing body. The imposed silence on the theatrical Queens in *Fela!* mirrors the silence the actual Queens still continue to experience in Fela Kuti historiography, and in this way the musical's principle of leadership, used to hail the transracial audience into a spiritual-moral collective, is itself troubled by the gap between intention and the lived experience of female silences in the show.

Within the narrative, Fela's mother Funmilayo "troubles" his conscience as a ghost, reappearing to him and urging him to right action. However, moving both outside of and through the narrative is the question of female representation, which troubles the reception of the musical across divides of gender and sexuality, despite the leadership the show celebrates in marching across divides of race. The argument Fela has with himself is mirrored in the larger arguments the musical seems to be having with the Broadway musical

[17] Responses to Isherwood's review, and responses to the responses, began to appear almost immediately on popular websites in America and in Nigeria. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/modiba/african-disneyland-a-resp_b_471942.html and http://nigerianstalk.org/2010/02/20/minstrelsy-fela-versus-broadway-the-charles-isherwood-review/ are two such examples.

theater industry over convention, and in the arguments the musical has with itself about how gender and sexuality impact the tensile quality of blackness.

Conclusion

To say that *Fela!* does not completely or adequately address the suffering of black women, created primarily as it was by a team of men, is not to offer a critique that should do fatal damage to our esteem for the show as a significant achievement in both North American and African diasporic theater. *Fela!* is a superior achievement in dance and in the use of dance as an organizer and carrier of meaning (narrative, linear and otherwise). The musical is a significant education in Fela Kuti and a tremendously accessible introduction for Americans to Nigerian culture and history. The show's global public reach and its potential for becoming and remaining a definitive account of Fela Kuti's story in American popular culture, makes it urgent that its omissions with women and problematic silences be addressed. Perhaps this can happen through more Fela Kuti dramatizations and musicalizations that will give full attention to the labors of the performing women, since it is through the bodies of performing women that the idea and reality of black victimization, black agency, and black spiritual practice is often made visible in popular culture.

The show can be regarded as a success due to its winning of three prestigious Tony Awards and its general increased presence in Western popular culture. When the Tony Award nominations were announced in May of 2010, *Fela!* tied (at 11 total nominations) with a new revival of *La Cage Aux Follies* for the most nominations that year. *Fela!* won the Outer Critics Circle Award and three of the Tony Awards, including a Tony for best choreography. In November 2010 a second cast of *Fela!* was assembled for a run of the show at London's National Theatre, which was filmed and then broadcast to hundreds of participating theaters around the world. A special presentation of *Fela!* was toured in Nigeria, with some

performances actually held at the Kuti family's Afrika Shrine space, and on January 2, 2011, the Broadway cast played its final show (with R&B star Patti LaBelle taking over the role of Funmilayo for Lillias White). Although *Fela!* ran on Broadway for a total of fourteen months, LaBelle's star turn in the show, as well as the heavenly constellation of popular African American entertainers joining the project as producers, have all contributed to its longer legacy in musical theater culture.

Understanding the work of Jones and Lewis in *Fela!* is not unlike understanding the work of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's music: Africanist performance *is* theory, and this black theory changes as practices and recognitions of blackness change, as belongings to blackness change, as blackness as a tensile, shared understanding is stretched and expanded by its practitioners to keep it recognizable yet relevant to its historical moment. What is raced as black *can* serve as the point of connection, even identification and belonging across race. The possibility of a transracial community being unified under a black rubric is, as I mentioned at the start of the chapter, the prevailing political discourse at this point in American history. Obama's victory speech, given after he had won the presidential race in November 2008, asserted that "our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared."[18] Obama's rhetoric in this speech invoked the image of a harmonious, transracial future for the nation that he, as a man of color, would help facilitate. This same idealistic and anticipatory gesture is made by the artists involved with *Fela!*, whose collective summoning calls old definitions of blackness into question while simultaneously celebrating the virtuosity and political intelligence of Africanist performance forms.

In staging an African character who moves from disengagement to engagement, the creators of *Fela!* point to a new politics of relation, one in which the distanced spectator

[18] Barack Obama, "Full Transcript: Sen. Barack Obama's Victory Speech," November 2008, Web, http://www.*abcnews.com* (accessed May 26, 2014).

becomes the committed actor, where the traditional aesthetic of the "fourth wall" in Western stage performance is broken, and where we are engaged, physically, in the dirty, troublesome, complicated lives of others. Through *Fela!* Hendel, Lewis, and Jones ultimately argue that it is within this messy, post-colonial engagement with others/Others that hope for the globally interacting world resides. The critical content and critical form of *Fela!* make its inclusion in this dissertation necessary as the politics of the location of blackness, and its cultural expressions, continue to multiply in complexity in the twenty-first century.

The various summons to transracial community, as described here in *Fela!*, are central to the ideology of Africa-focused Broadway musicals in the first decades of the twenty-first century, but also play an essential role in other Broadway musicals concerned with African diasporic experience and with race in general. *The Book of Mormon* (2011), for example, similarly summons the audience into transracial community, and relies on appeals of improvisational identity and spiritual-moral leadership to do so. While *Book of Mormon* further prioritizes, in its conversation with the audience, a discussion of spiritual-moral leadership (and the hypocrisy therein), *Passing Strange* (2008) prioritizes the idea of improvisational identity, and send its main character, Youth, embarking a quest to live out various identities. *Memphis* (2009) also appeals to notions of spiritual-moral leadership, to improvisational identity, and to political alignment, and like *Book of Mormon* prioritizes its themes of spiritual-moral leadership in the context of the historic civil rights struggle in America during the 1950s and 1960s. All these recent shows gesture to a vision of transracial community—in fact, all three mentioned here also feature positive inter-racial love relationships as an aspect of this transracial vision. Yet *Fela!* is noteworthy in comparison for its direct engagement with the idea of political alignment, and for

understanding, as Rowe does, that personal identity and progressive political work does not develop outside of a living community.

Conclusion: The Politics of Imagination in Africa-focused Broadway Musicals

When I began this study in 2008, I began with the assumption that Broadway musicals set in Africa "spoke" culturally and politically to members of the African diaspora. My original questions about Africa-focused musicals were challenges to this assumption, and also asked to what degree Africa-focused musicals were significant to non-black members of society. In particular, I thought about white citizens like Jim Lewis and Julie Taymor. Their theatrical contributions to Africa-focused shows were central to the existence and success of their associated works, and helped facilitate the creative choices of both black and non-black artists who continue to address Africa on the Broadway musical stage. Jim Lewis, for example, created a monologue structure for the telling of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's story in *Fela!*, a choice which made the intervention of music and Bill T. Jones' choreography necessary and allowed the actor playing Kuti to share more about his life and politics than most musicals would allow. Julie Taymor's conceptualization of *The Lion King* expanded Broadway's aesthetic horizons through a celebration of global blackness and in doing so expanded the job market for black performers working in Broadway musical theater.

I asked myself, to what degree, if any, could the staging of Africa on Broadway be understood as a shared project, and if shared, under what agenda or rubric? I also began to notice certain disconnects between what I admired as aesthetic successes on Broadway and what got passed down as successes through the academic archive—the "canon" of musical theater works being shaped by scholarly attention. In this conclusion, I will examine the four common ways to measure success in Broadway musicals: critical success (the historical scholarship generated about a show and its academic archival presence), material success

(the financial achievement and geographic-spatial endurance of a show), popular success (the public, cultural, or sub-cultural reverence of a show), and visionary success (the imaginative, sensory, and ideological richness of a show). These categories are not mutually exclusive but are also not consistently linked to one another. A popular and material success like *Mama Mia!* (2001)[1] might arguably be less successful in its visionary achievement and even less successful in terms of the critical attention it has received or its footprint within the archival record. A visionary success like *Rent* (1996),[2] on the other hand, might additionally be considered a success according to all three of the other measures.

The two most easily understood and yet most calcified ways of determining the achievement and value of a Broadway musical are to measure its critical and its material success. The critical success of a show is largely based on whatever received history has already been established for it in the academic archival record. Often this scholarly record has been based on the show's material success, and the material success has been influenced by a host of prevailing social forces, including what has been said about the show by the critics and historians who contribute to the academic record. While this is not an entirely closed system, my study has led me to see that race continues to over-determine the critical history of Broadway musicals as they are recorded in theatre and performance scholarship.[3]

[1] Playbill Staff and Jennifer Brown, "Long Runs on Broadway – Playbill.com," *Long Runs on Broadway - Playbill.com* (July 21, 2013), Accessed July 26, 2013, http://www.playbill.com/celebritybuzz/article/75222-Long-Runs-on-Broadway. *Mama Mia* is currently number ten on the list of the longest running Broadway musicals in history.

[2]Stanley Green, *Broadway musicals: show by show,* ed Kay Green (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1996), 305. *RENT* (1996) won a Pulitzer Prize and is considered to be the first rock musical to speak directly to the concerns of its generation since *HAIR* (1968) thirty years earlier.

[3] John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 1-3. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century a number of books have been published which reflect a desire to revise the conventional history of Broadway, though this revisionary work is undertaken for a range of reasons. John Bush Jones, for example, aims in his book to

Critical assessments of Africa-focused musicals (and of Africanist-centered musicals in general) can improve when the wider understanding of what these shows aesthetically accomplish improves.

I assumed that white creators and black creators of the shows I covered in my dissertation would bring with them a range of cultural biases and multiple subjectivities which would somehow be readable in the works themselves. I was interested in discovering the common ground among these artists, who were all drawn to treating the enduring trope of Africa in this medium. In doing so I hoped to better articulate or defend what I see as the productive anti-racist work of many of these shows. Despite the apparent problems that attend the staging of African representations within the imperialist, capitalist, and historically anti-black, racist space of Broadway musical theater, I set out at the beginning of this study to locate and affirm the possible good in such staging.

Material success is also an easily understood measure, but just as misleading sometimes, particularly with musicals dealing with race in a high-stakes industry like Broadway. For Broadway musicals generally, the wealth of the original producers of the shows helps determine the shows' presence in the archive. Disney's *The Lion King*, for example, had its corporation's financial support for the creation of its lavish gift shop and related artifacts, for

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"examine musicals both in history and as history during the twentieth century." Jones wants to explicate musicals as a form of history-making. To limit his study, he focuses on Broadway musicals that spoke to the issues or anxieties of their eras, and that also seem to have been consciously intended to have social relevance, as opposed to shows that were created for the purposes of pure entertainment. Jones' book is important as an argument for musical theater as a kind of social theory-in-practice. However, Jones does not critique—though he does at least acknowledge—the white male "normative" and dominant positions that he and the historiographic practices of musical theater scholarship inhabit. Jones explicitly defines what he understands to be socially relevant in musical theater as being that which concerns the middle class white male, and supports this assertion with a circular argument. He claims that he has discounted financial concerns in his selections for the book, basing his measure of a musical's success or failure on "audience appeal alone," yet later in the text asserts that appeal for Broadway musicals is usually "indicated by the length of their runs," which is a financially determined factor.

the sponsorship of the television, radio, print, and street-level advertisements for the show, and for the subsidy of the many discounted tickets offered to students and lower-income or non-subscription patrons whose presence helped solidify the public and visionary success of that show. Money is also necessary to fund the recording of a show's cast album, which extends the reach of a show in culture and boosts its popularity among ticket buyers. Because of the lack of additional production costs relative to the stage performance, a recorded performance, once available for sale on the market, can often make its producers more money than the original show. Furthermore, access to audio and video recordings of Broadway shows and their reviews is essential in helping scholars of musical theater construct their arguments. Many African-focused Broadway musicals created by blacks are lacking archival presence compared to those shows created by whites precisely because black shows often do not come to Broadway with the same degree of financial backing. These are some of the important ways that the race-affiliated financial wealth acquired for a show can determine its presence in the archive.

Another measure of success for Broadway musicals is their popular cultural or sub-cultural reception by the public and theatre critics. Public success for black-created Africa-focused Broadway musicals has often been high, as I have suggested in some of these case studies. For example, *Fela!* has had a committed public following since its debut off-Broadway in 2008. Record producer and drummer Amhir "Questlove" Thompson saw the show and was so moved by it that on returning to his home, he posted a substantial passionate review of the show on the internet at 6 a.m. and emailed that text as well. Thompson's message was widely forwarded around the internet and created an overnight sensation among his fans and writers of fashion and culture magazines working to stay informed of the latest trends. Thompson, who later became the bandleader for the *Jimmy*

Fallon Show, is widely followed and respected in urban music culture as one of the finest living drummers. He brought *Fela!* to the attention of many who, living outside of New York City, would not have otherwise heard about the Off-Broadway show. I myself first discovered the *Fela!* show in that manner, happening across Thompson's blog while I was surfing the internet for some school-related research. Although grassroots support has been the key for many shows in moving to Broadway, the degree to which many Africa-focused Broadway shows are acknowledged as having generated and maintained popular success is not often recorded in official and published histories.

There is one other measure of gauging a Broadway musical's achievement, in addition to gauging its critical, material, and popular success. A musical's politics of imagination, its sensory pleasures, and its ideological density—what I am calling visionary success—is an equally important measure of success for Broadway shows, and the most important one in determining the achievement of Africa-focused Broadway musicals. What my study reveals to me is that the Africa-focused Broadway musical seems to continually occupy a critical space in musical theater history in terms of representations of racial difference. The representations staged in these shows are often created by a multi-ethnic and transnational group of artists, whose lives and contributions to the works challenge the essentializations that appear within the shows themselves but also in audience and critical assessments of the shows. As living theory, performances of anti-racist, Africa-focused Broadway musicals challenge understandings of race by staging new ideas about racial and national belonging.

An example of this is *Kykunkor*, whose Broadway audiences were so eager for a display of unambiguous tribal primitivity that the presence of African American females in the cast was continually commented on and linked to larger criticisms about the show's supposed "outside" (meaning western) influences. Francis Atkins, the African American dancer who

originated the role of the Bride in *Kykunkor*, challenged this desire for essentialized representations by posing in a program photo wearing her westernized, pressed and bob-style hairdo along with all the raffia and beads of her revealing "exotic" costume. The back page of the Broadway playbill displays a cigarette ad featuring the face of white Hollywood actress Joan Blondel, who is wearing a bob-style hairdo suspiciously identical to the one Atkins sports for her production photo within the same playbill. Atkins was participating in imperial beauty codes, to be sure, but she was also potentially imagining, and affirming, through her performance in *Kykunkor*, an identity that was both American and African, both modern and invested in a tradition that was tribal without being primitive.

While my six case studies show how musical theater artists throughout the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first century used the form to re-imagine blackness in response to a national discourse that seemed to construct that identity in persistently oppressive ways, these musicals also reveal how there has been little to no effort within the Broadway musical industry to re-imagine or even openly identify the construction of whiteness. The representation and understanding of a "universal" principle, constructed as a male, middle- to upper-class, European-American "whiteness," remains largely unmarked and unchallenged in the world of the Broadway musical. Missing is a necessary critique of the artifice of whiteness. Whiteness as an identity is subtly championed in the Broadway musical through its attachment to notions of modernity, reason, morality, and good art. While scholarship on Jewishness and musicals has begun to challenge some of the ethnic underpinnings of these assumptions,[4] more work on re-imagining racial identity and

[4] Most notably, Andrea Most's *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004) and Jack Gottlieb's *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood* (2004). Gottlieb speaks in one chapter about the "affinities between Jewish Americans and African Americans," identifying them as groups with histories of being simultaneously inside and outside of dominant culture. Gottlieb does not critique "whiteness" directly but his focus on

ideological privileges needs to be done. The difficulty of re-imagining whiteness in Broadway musical theater, and the constructive, anti-racist potential inherent in the attempt, is evident in the most recent of African-focused Broadway musicals, the award-winning *Book of Mormon* (2011). The show succeeds in affirming African intelligence and resourcefulness in the face of resource deprivation, and satirizes the primitive gaze western society has constructed for its viewing of the continent. However, despite the show's laudable use of humor to create collaborative moments of understanding for its mostly white audience, *The Book of Mormon* still presents a staged Africa that keeps its American audience comfortably in their privilege.

Debuting on Broadway in March, 2011, *The Book of Mormon* is an intentionally irreverent farce musical about two white, male, middle class Mormon missionaries who are sent without much cultural preparation into a chaotic village in Uganda, with the hope of transforming the bleak social, political, and environmental situation of the village's oppressed residents. The non-black creative team consists of Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone. Prior to working on *Book of Mormon*, Parker and Stone had already gained considerable fame, and had become widely recognized as iconic writers for their generation, due to their work as creator-writer-producers of the animated television series *South Park* (1997)--a show that gained notoriety for its irreverent humor. Lopez, who was specifically inspired by the work of the duo, had achieved some Broadway fame for his work as a composer-lyricist for the musical comedy *Avenue Q* (2003), which gave puppet-centered

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the uniquely Jewish elements of Broadway make the critique implicit. Most's critique goes further, in asserting that Jewish creators of the Broadway musical re-figured their Jewish "Other-ness" through the musical theater form into a marketable and influential expression of "American-ness." Her important study fragments the monolithic notion of race on stage by revealing the ways (white) American normativity was constructed in the Broadway musical by so many artists who were otherwise culturally marginalized.

children's television shows a radical, queer re-telling. Separately, then, the creators had established themselves as cultural satirists who were willing to shock or offend in the pursuit of comedic cultural critiques. As a team, they achieved what is arguably a new level of shock humor in *The Book of Mormon* by focusing their satirical talents on the history, practices, and public cultural perceptions of the Mormon Church.

In the story of the musical, the two missionaries arrive in a Ugandan village that is crippled by a lack of resources and a fearsome "butt-raping" warlord. The boys are armed with nothing but their own ignorance of the world outside of America and an earnest desire to make this outside world a better place by converting the "primitive" people of Uganda to Mormonism through shallow but well-meaning platitudes. One boy is a leader, convinced of his own awesomeness and determined to be the best in the world regardless of how manipulative he might have to be, while his sidekick is a bungling but kind-hearted helper and dreamer, and together the two can be seen as symbols for two aspects of America's international vision of itself. The plot thickens as the leader draws the increasing ire of the warlord, while the dreamer falls in love with a village girl who happens to love western gadgets and whose own dream, in traditional Broadway musical fashion, is of living in a better place.

Terrorized by the warlord and desperate for some solution to their problems, the villagers come with open hearts and minds to the dreamer for spiritual guidance. The dreamer does not actually know Mormon scripture well, but he understands the heart of it, and invents his version of Mormon theology for the Ugandans, who in turn improvise on it further in ways that are culturally appropriate and intentionally comedic. When the Mormon elders make their inspection visit to the village, they are as much surprised as the audience is delighted to see the Ugandans speak back to these symbolic figures of colonialism in a kind of double-

parody. By presenting the Mormon scripture in a reconfigured, indigenized way, the Africans assert their agency and tribal values while also establishing their modernity as people able to improvise in and change the course of history. Rather than perform the frozen-in-time African exhibit, the villagers perform contemporary resourcefulness and reveal the Mormon elders as the ones who are sadly frozen in their views.

Africans are presented here as people who have the power to appropriate and create culture rather than as people who are hopelessly duped by the world around them, and in the end the leader, dreamer, and villagers all come to realize how they must depend on each other and collaborate in a spirit of openness in order to prosper as a community. This message is the final message of the musical and it is presented in direct contrast to the opening Mormon church sequence, wherein the audience learns about the ways the church is not at all open and collaborative. Ultimately *The Book of Mormon* achieves its creators' aims: making fun of the various cultural dogmas that divide people from one another and critiquing some of the assumptions westerners hold about the rest of the world. However, what the musical fails to do is critique its own investment in the dogma of western, white male privilege, something that *The Book of Mormon*'s critics and celebrants have likewise failed to fully acknowledge.

The most disturbing moment of the musical is its ending, where the audience sees the Ugandan people working as unorthodox converts to the Mormon Church. In other words, despite its lessons about appreciating difference and resisting religious fundamentalism that the musical has spent its two or more hours trying to convey, the show still ends with Africans who have been converted to a western, and supposedly more “civilized” and deprivation-free, way of life. The fact that the larger questions about the provision of material, environmental, and governmental resources for the villagers have not been

answered is wholly ignored in the musical's quest for a traditionally happy Broadway musical ending. The likelihood that the Africans will be happier living western-looking lifestyles or even living in the west is suggested by the female lead, who has sung this already and who represents the inherent goodness and morality of the people of the village. Furthermore, the fact that the Africans are performing their own syncretic version of Mormonism does not make up for the fact that we are never shown the moral systems that this new religion is replacing. While the actual Uganda of our living present may have a wealth of political activists and religious expressions, this richness is vacated in order to make what starts to uncomfortably resemble a century-old joke at the expense of blacks: that black people have nothing of their own (of value) that whites have not provided, except the desire to have something.

The Book of Mormon continues to be enjoyed by large musical theater audiences in America and Europe, who remain generally less critical of the way Africa is satirized on stage in this genre.[5] The show is imperfect, but Parker, Stone, and Lopez nevertheless attempt in *The Book of Mormon t*o better imagine Africa in a Broadway musical. *The Book of Mormon* pokes fun at the world by staging an imaginative journey to a farcical Africa and is, on its own, noteworthy for its tremendous popularity, winning nine Tony Awards in 2011, including Best Musical. Beyond the praise it has received as a successful entertainment, the show is critically important for the challenges it makes on behalf of African agency, western obnoxiousness in international relations, inter-racial relationships and sexual orientation, as well as its main critique of religious dogmatism and white or middle-class American cultural ignorance.

[5] Megan Gibson, "*Book of Mormon* Cleans Up at the Olivier Awards," *Time*, http://time.com/61449/book-of-mormon-olivier-awards/ (accessed May 31, 2014). *The Book of Mormon* most recently won four prestigious British stage awards.

However, *The Book of Mormon*'s creators join the lot of all Africa-focused Broadway musical creators in their uneven, albeit imaginative, fights against the circulation of destructive stereotypes. These creators, black and non-black alike, create and circulate their new, imaginative visions of Africa, but the difficulties in the processes of creation, circulation, and reception of these visions point repeatedly to a larger and pervasive lack of imagination around the interwoven issues of race, class, religion, nationality, gender, and sexuality. As the genre develops, it is my hope that the critical contributions musical theater artists make to the larger discussion through their imaginative works will continue, will deepen and will contribute to a social and perceptual change in our identitarian attitudes and policies.

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